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## THE WAR BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

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### INTERVIEW: RICHARD PERLE



Richard Perle served in the Reagan administration from 1981 to 1987 as assistant secretary of defense for international security policy and is now chairman of the Defense Policy Board, an influential group of advisers to the Pentagon. In this interview with FRONTLINE, he makes the case for using a war with Iraq to remake the Middle East, and he stresses the significance of Sept. 11 in shaping the Bush administration's thinking about the links between terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. On the question of multilateralism versus unilateralism in America's foreign policy, Perle argues, "We cannot abdicate responsibility for our own security. Multilateralism is preferable ... but if the only way you can get a consensus is by abandoning your most fundamental interests, then it is not helpful." This interview was conducted on Jan. 25, 2003.

**Can you tell us some of the concerns of some of the early advisors to this administration, who went down to Austin? Was there a concern about the Iraqi situation, the North Korean situation? What was being discussed early on?**

Early in the preparation of the presidential campaign, the issue of Iraq had surfaced, because it was such an obvious unsettled matter -- unsettled in the sense that inspectors had been expelled, in fact. We knew less and less about what was going on inside Iraq. The pressure on the sanctions was mounting. The coalition that had gotten behind sanctions was dissolving right in front of us with the French and the Russians breaking ranks. And it was very clear that this was one of the issues a new administration was going to have to face.

**Were there directions discussed, possible directions that might be looked at as the administration matures?**

There was anticipation of the election, a lot of discussion about foreign policy generally, and specifically about Iraq. Of course, it was understood that Iraq had to be dealt with. It was also understood that the outgoing administration was leaving the incoming administration in a very difficult position. And it allowed Saddam eight years to outlast all efforts to discipline him. The inspectors had been expelled. So, there were no easy options, that was clear. It was clear that it was going to be a difficult proposition. And it was also clear that it was unavoidable, that we were going to have to deal with it. So,

one of the earliest decisions of the new administration was a review of Iraq policy.



**"One of the sources of anti-Americanism, which is this slander about our motives, will be decisively contradicted by our behavior [in Iraq]. We're not going to steal Iraq's oil. We're not going to dominate the region. So there is the potential both to transform the region and perceptions of the United States."**

**The president's point of view on this when it first came up early on, even during the elections -- could you shed some light on how he viewed it?**

Well, I think, he understood that Saddam was very dangerous, and we did not have a policy in place that was adequate to the challenge that he posed. I don't believe he'd made up his mind about what needed to be done. And he was anticipating that a review by the administration, once he became president, would develop some policy recommendations.

**Skipping back in history a little bit more, February of '91, the Gulf War is suspended, President Bush I, 41, decides that we had gone far enough. ... That discussion that took place is pretty interesting. Can you tell us where you were when you heard that decision, and what your reaction was at that point?**

When it was announced suddenly that the war was over after a hundred hours, I was as surprised as anyone could have been surprised, because it seemed to me the war really wasn't over. We had the Republican Guard, which was the mainstay of Saddam's power, effectively surrounded and could have compelled their surrender, probably without much additional fighting. So, the idea that we would terminate hostilities and allow the Republican Guard to escape intact certainly took me by surprise. And seemed to me, at the time, to be most unwise.

**Was there a prevalent view, or a minority view within the Pentagon at that point? Some has been said about Mr. Wolfowitz's view. But was there a view in the Pentagon about this that differed with the decision?**

I'm only familiar with Paul Wolfowitz's view, and he believed then that it was a mistake to end the war, as we did under the circumstances. I suspect there were others who shared that view. But it's important to remember that most people believed that Saddam Hussein was finished. It is true that he was still in Baghdad. But Americans have a tendency to judge the world through American eyes. And no American politician could survive a debacle like Saddam Hussein's defeat. And, therefore, they assumed that Saddam was a passing phenomenon. They underestimated the way in which he was able to cling to power, and the means he would use to remain in power. That was the mistake.

But, on the day the decision was made to end the war, I don't think any of the principals believed that Saddam would be there. And the idea that he would be there a decade later would have been considered preposterous.

**[Soon after the Gulf War] we're realizing that this was a new age, post-Cold War. New theories, new documents needed to be developed, leading to the Defense Planning Guidance that Wolfowitz wrote, and that got a lot of press back in '92. But can you bring us back to what the thinking was at that point, post-Gulf War, and before the end of that administration? What was going on? ...**

I think attention after the Gulf War turned to what the American role would be. The Gulf War then was largely thought to have been a great success on the part of the United States and its allies. It looked as though some sort of world order might emerge with the United States in a leadership position, but with broad agreement among our friends and allies. There was tremendous optimism at that time. And understandably, we had just been through half a century of Cold War with the existential threat that a massively armed and nuclear Soviet Union posed.

So, people thought that there were no more global issues; there would be regional issues. And we would have to deal with specific problems in specific regions. And attention was turned to those regional issues. People like Paul Wolfowitz, who were quite prescient, understood that the regions were seething with potential conflict. And he was eager to develop concepts for regional security.

**So the Defense Planning Guidance is leaked to the papers. Tell us about that. The importance of what was being written, thought about, and the reaction to it.**

Well, as I recall the reaction to the national security guidelines in 1992, the disparaging comments centered on the idea that the United States should inhibit the development of a superpower that could rival the United States. That seemed to some of us common sense. We had just been through half a century of Cold War. If there were ways to prevent the rise of a power that might introduce another Cold War that seemed a perfectly sensible thing to do.

But, people were already out spending the peace dividend and there was not much interest in hearing about a new challenge, and a new vigilance.

**Who was complaining?**

Well, the complaints about the idea that the United States should try to discourage the ascendancy of a great power came largely from that wellspring of bad ideas -- our intellectual establishment, our universities, our pundits. And it was all wrapped up in the euphoria of the end of the Cold War -- [the end of which] was not acknowledged by those same skeptics to have been the product of American strength. So, people who had been getting it wrong all along continued to get it wrong.

**How did what we learned from the Gulf War directly change or adjust that debate?**

One result of the Gulf War experience was the recognition that we had not reached nirvana with the demise of the Soviet Union. There were still problems. And we would still need to concern ourselves about security in a number of places. It led some people to begin to contemplate a reorganization, restructuring of our military forces, which were oriented entirely toward deterring possibly fighting the Soviet Union in the center of Europe. And they were not adequate for other missions.

One of the reasons why we had to transport half a million men to fight in 1991 is that we had a large, cumbersome, heavy force. We didn't have agility. We couldn't move quickly. It took months to build it. So, people began to become affected about new security challenges, and the inadequacy of our military forces to cope with regional contingencies.

**The doctrine that is released -- the National Security Strategy that's released last September -- how much of it takes its roots directly from that document back in '92?**

I think there's great continuity between the ideas that emerged in the 1992 document and the most recent one. And it seems to me they're an intelligent and sensible response to the reality we now face. So it's not surprising there would be continuity. And, I think, that would be true even if you didn't have some of the same personalities involved. ...

**How relevant is it, or interesting, or ironic, that included eventually in the Defense Planning Guidance were certain potential adversaries, or situations, that would occur, and one of them that was written up included this possibility that we would find ourselves in the position of fighting both Iraq and North Korea at the exact same time?**

I think the study of that situation ... is attributed to the impressions of the people who organized that effort. They understood where the danger points were. And they must have, at least intuitively, known in the event of a problem in one region, the other -- Kim Il Sung in those days, now Kim Jong Il, Saddam Hussein in those days, now Saddam Hussein -- might exploit preoccupation with one area in order to overload the circuits.

**What does it say that a decade later we are in that potential situation?**

I think the fact that we're in that situation a decade later is a monumental rebuke to the presidency of Bill Clinton because in eight years he did nothing to improve our position to deal either with Iraq or North Korea.

**There's a debate or conversation that goes on during the years that the Republicans are out of office, leading up to some extent, I suppose, to the much talked about '98 letter that you signed and Rumsfeld signed, and Wolfowitz signed, and Kristol signed, which went to Clinton saying, "Iraq is still a problem. It needs to be dealt with in some way or another." Give us a glimpse of the debate, the conversation among your circle, people that you were working with, about this specific issue.**

Well, there was a broad consensus about what should be done with respect to Saddam Hussein, certainly among people who signed the letter to President Clinton in 1998. We all agreed that this was a danger, that it would only get worse and that some decisive action should be taken.

We couldn't get the Clinton administration interested in that. One of the results of that letter was a meeting at the White House with Sandy Berger. And I remember walking out of that meeting with Don Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz. And Don Rumsfeld observed him, and these were his words. He said, "Did you notice that with respect to every argument we made, Sandy Berger's response had to do with how it would look and not with what it meant for our security?" Totally preoccupied with political perceptions of administration policy, and practically indifferent to the situation we were in, and the danger that we faced.

**So, how important, in your view, does it become that a lot of people involved in that debate during that time, Rumsfeld and Cheney and Wolfowitz, and yourself, all become very important parts of the next administration?**

It was, in fact, an accident of history that the new administration, the Bush administration, included people with so much experience with the Gulf region and a serious and sustained interest in reflection on the challenges that it posed. So, as the issue reached the climax, you had around the table people with considerable knowledge and experience, like Dick Cheney, who led the first Gulf War, like Don Rumsfeld who, among other things, had been a Middle East coordinator and understood the region very well. ...

**How significant is the fact that on 9/11, that evening, the president immediately steps us up to not fighting a group of terrorists but bringing it to sponsor states? And then soon after at Camp David, Rumsfeld is bringing up the possibility that perhaps we should be looking at Iraq here?**

I think Sept. 11 is the precipitating event. And it was, in part, because the lesson of Sept. 11 was that if you ignore problems, they don't go away. Because everything we did after Sept. 11, to go after Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, which was its national base, if you will, could have been done before Sept. 11. And had it been done before Sept. 11 there's every reason to believe we not only would have avoided Sept. 11, and the death of 3,000 people, but we might well have been able largely to destroy Al Qaeda, because it was all in one place.

By the time we understood the danger we were in and went after Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, they were dispersed all over the place. So, it's going to take us years to deal with the Al Qaeda diaspora, which could have been avoided if we acted first.

And on Sept. 11, the president made what I think is probably the most important statement in all the statements by him and others, and that was that we would not distinguish between the terrorists and the countries that harbor them. Because we will never defeat terrorism, if terrorists can organize free, if they have the run of the sanctuary in which to train, recruit and plan. So, we have to make life so difficult for the terrorists that they can't be effective. And going after countries that harbor them has got to be the critical element. ...

**Following up on that, the basic question, what does a war against Iraq have to do with the fight against terrorism?**

Well, I think, the relationship between the fight against terrorism and dealing with Saddam Hussein is complicated, but very clear. For one thing, Saddam Hussein harbors

terrorists. He's done it for years and years. There are terrorists today living in Baghdad, and carrying out operations when they have opportunities to do so. ...

Secondly, we now have clearly established links between Al Qaeda and Iraqi intelligence, links that are beyond dispute. We've gone back and looked at the evidence that was never properly investigated before, old evidence, but looked at in the light of recent experience. And we find meetings between Al Qaeda and Iraqi intelligence, training programs in Iraq for Al Qaeda and agreements, something has been called a non-aggression pact, but it's really a friendship and cooperation pact between Al Qaeda and the Iraqis. So, there's a clear established relationship there as well.

But, lastly, if the United States' war against terrorism consists of destroying the Taliban in Afghanistan, and we then recoil from dealing effectively with Saddam Hussein, we will set a threshold. We will be saying to terrorists, "Go locate in a country that's a bit bigger, and you're home free because we won't challenge you. A country that's a little bit bigger." So, I believe that even if we had not gone as far as we have now gone, at which point turning back has its own catastrophic consequences, even if we were not where we are today, a failure to come to grips with Iraq would gravely diminish our ability to win the war on terrorism.

**You told us in October 2001 that the issue was weapons of mass destruction and not ties to Al Qaeda. Yet the administration went through a period of time, of attempts to connect Iraq to 9/11, specifically to the anthrax attacks. Why? And what were the results?**

Well, I think the administration was trying to present the broadest and most comprehensive view of the situation and weapons of mass destruction [were] clearly the principle concern. But, if there were ties to Al Qaeda, those needed to be expressed and explained. And there is a relationship too between weapons of mass destruction and terrorism which is that the availability of weapons of mass destruction to terrorists is the single greatest challenge that we face. And the president has, I think, quite a crisp formulation of this. And that is that we mustn't allow the worst weapons to fall into the hands of the worst regimes.

One thing is very clear. Al Qaeda was happy to destroy 3,000 lives on Sept. 11. They would have been happier if they could have destroyed 300,000. And they will continue to try to destroy Americans in the largest numbers they can imagine. So, they're around the world seeking the weapons to do it. And the more opportunity they have, the more widely diffused these weapons are, the greater the danger.

So we have to operate on both fronts, dealing with the terrorists themselves, and dealing with countries that harbor them. And with countries that have the weapons that can so empower them that we would be in grave jeopardy.

**Why did the administration think it necessary to find the direct links? Was that a misunderstanding, misstep, or something that they needed to do politically?**

Once the administration set about exploring these links, they found them, so they exist. There was an argument within the administration about how much emphasis to place on this. And some people argue, "We don't want to focus on these things because the principal reason for dealing with Saddam Hussein is the weapons of mass destruction." And if you appear to be focused on the ties to Al Qaeda, you lose the far more compelling argument that it's too dangerous to [allow Saddam Hussein to possess] those weapons.

So, the effort to unearth those links was almost half-hearted in a sense. There was no desire to emphasize that, and indeed it wasn't emphasized.

**You've advocated the use of military force versus Iraq, and others beyond Afghanistan, to make a point, a very important point that we will use -- this is your quote -- "We will use whatever tool necessary." And that they are truly in jeopardy. What do you mean by that? Why is this important?**

Because prior to Sept. 11, if you organized with the view to carrying out terrorist acts against the United States, there was always the danger that you would be caught. But not all terrorists by any means have been caught. There was no sense that the consequences would be catastrophic for you, if you were a government turning a blind eye, or even more, giving support to those terrorist activities.

So, it was cheap and easy. ... That is a way to encourage people to open their doors to terrorists. We've got to turn that around. It's got to be costly. It's in our interest that every government make a deliberate decision: Will I invite terrorists in? Will I give them the run of the place? Will I help them? And what are the costs if I do that? And what are the costs if I don't? What are the benefits?

So, if we're going to try to shape the thinking of the countries that can choose to support terrorism or oppose it, we've got to raise the costs. The cost of facilitating terror against the United States, prior to Sept. 11, was essentially zero.

**Is an important part of the strategy that you better hit Iraq, especially after you've gone this far down the line, as a sign to places like North Korea, and perhaps down the road China?**

In global politics, everybody's watching, making judgments about the strength and resilience of the United States. The whole world focuses on us. If the United States blanches, and now fails to carry through on what has been a pretty deliberate policy, this will be an enormous encouragement to terrorists, to states that harbor them, that we are in effect a paper tiger, if you will. And, I think, it will open the floodgates to terror against us. We are simply too far down the road to recoil.

So, unless there is another solution to the problem of Saddam Hussein, I don't think there's much choice but to disarm Saddam Hussein, take away his weapons of mass destruction. We cannot simply walk away. What do we say? We thought it was a bad idea to leave him there, but now we think it's a good idea?

**There is a defined grand scheme, that what you accomplish in Iraq also has monumental effects within the region. What is the feeling? What could be accomplished?**

I think there is tremendous potential if we prosecute this war in the right way with the right result -- which is the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime and its replacement with a group of Iraqis who will move the country in the direction of a humane and open politics -- there is tremendous potential to transform the region.

First it will inspire the opponents of the regime in Iran. I have no doubt about that. And the opponents are many because life is miserable under the mullahs. If a tyrant like

Saddam Hussein can be brought down, others are going to begin to think -- they're already thinking -- they may begin to act to bring down the tyrants who are afflicting them in pretty much the same way. So I would think the results would be beneficial in Iran.

I also think some autocratic regimes in the region will accelerate whatever efforts they might make anyway to reform themselves internally, and to open their political process. Because the absence of democracy in the Arab world, the absence of a say in the life of the country of ordinary people is destabilizing and dangerous.

So I think this will accelerate the process of reform. It may be reluctant reform, regimes opening things up a little bit because they fear the consequences of not opening. But the rigid dictatorial governments of most of the Arab world may begin to give way.

And finally, if Iraq moves from the column of opponents of the peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians into the column of proponents, that could have an important major effect on whatever prospect there is for negotiating a settlement to that very difficult conflict.

**There's an opposite view, that they might not do this, that you might cause huge trouble. But also, how does it affect other problems down the line? How does this move affect this very difficult, complicated world?**

I think when the United States acts decisively, it strengthens the influence of the United States.

Secondly, I believe that much of the charge against the United States, in the current situation, that we are interested in dominating the Middle East, that we are interested in Iraqi oil, for example, much of the charge against us will be blown away by our behavior in the aftermath of the success.

So, one of the sources of anti-Americanism, which is this slander about our motives, will be decisively contradicted by our behavior. We're not going to steal Iraq's oil. It's going to go to the people of Iraq. We're not going to dominate the region. We're going to stay only long enough to permit Iraqis to achieve a stable government. And then we'll be gone.

The idea that is used to animate anti-American feeling -- that we are rapacious, that we are imperialist -- will have been demonstrated to be false. So, in this one situation in Iraq, there is the potential both to transform the region and perceptions of the United States.

**Colin Powell has argued for multilateralism continually, especially since spring of last year on. How winning an argument does he make? It's been described to us that he's a very good diplomatic knife fighter, and that he's been very successful, in a way, at sort of pushing this direction. What's your take on the rightness or the misconception of that point of view?**

Multilateralism is fine in principle. What is not fine is having our interests adversely affected by the inability to gain a sufficient degree of multilateral support. And what is not fine is subsuming American interests, particularly where security is concerned, in some larger notion that, if the only option is unilateral, we should be paralyzed. We can't do that. We cannot abdicate responsibility for our own security.

So, multilateralism is preferable, if we can get a consensus. But if the only way you can get a consensus is by abandoning your most fundamental interests, then it is not helpful. So it's a question of how much multilateralism in what circumstances.

The Clinton administration went so overboard with multilateralism that they created the impression that the United States was just another country, that we would be bound in the way every little dictatorship in Africa would be bound. We would all sign agreements together. We'd get as many signatures as possible. And we would behave the way everyone else would behave.

I think that's a complete abdication of American leadership and responsibility. We're not just another country. And if we are ever led by people who regard us as just another country, the whole world is going to be in trouble.

### **Was the decision to go to the U.N. a mistake? The correct direction?**

The idea of going to the United Nations was a good idea so long as the support for a strong U.N. demand of the Iraqis would not prevent us, in the event that the Iraqis failed to respond, from taking action, even if the U.N. was then not prepared to take action.

### **Does it box us in? Are we boxed in at this point in any way or, conceivably, the near future?**

I believe that an American president is only boxed in if he accepts to be boxed in.

### **There was a large debate during the Clinton administration of a post-Cold War theory that was very different, of much more involvement of the United States, an understanding of the power that America had, and the responsibility to deal with threats that were post-Cold War oriented. ...**

I believe that the big philosophical divide is between a kind of insipid globalism in which it is believed that the more agreements we can sign on a global basis, the better, the more signatories to the more conventions on nuclear weapons, on biological weapons, on an international criminal court, on environment, the more we can produce agreements in which everybody is around the table, including the dictators, the better. That's one view.

The other view is that there is a core of liberal democracies, Western industrial nations, by and large, who share common values and common interests, who are collectively threatened by the North Koreans, by the Iraqs, by the Libyas, and the Syrias, and the rest, and they ought to band together to protect their common interests, which happen to reflect the best interests of mankind. The Clinton administration was on the globalist side. You've seen the result. I think this Bush administration is rather more on the side of getting the Western liberal democracies together to protect their interests. ...

### **The "axis of evil" speech, [2002] State of the Union speech, when you heard that, what were your thoughts? How important was that speech?**

The president's invocation of an "axis of evil" reminded me very much of Ronald Reagan's invocation of an evil empire. At the time, Ronald Reagan's epithet was derided.

And something rather similar happened to what President Bush said. I think Reagan was vindicated, ultimately. Nobody would deny, today, that the Soviet Union was an empire that was evil.

And I expect to live to see people acknowledge that North Korea, Iran and Iraq constitute an axis of evil, in the sense that the regimes are brutal totalitarian states, and abuse their own people. They are all trying very hard to acquire weapons of mass destruction. I think not for their own protection, but to further their missions.

And they are working together. Even within differences among them, they are working together. So we find the North Koreans becoming a source of weapons of mass destruction of anybody who has the money to pay. And we find the Iraqis hosting all kinds of terrorists on their territory. And we find the Iranians sponsoring acts of terror around the world.

So, I don't understand the difficulty in comprehending the idea that these three countries, with overlapping interests, even when sometimes contradictory, can fairly be described as an axis of evil. ...

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