

Podhoretz secretly urged Bush to bomb Iran

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September 24, 2007 10:06 AM EST

President Bush and Karl Rove sat listening to Norman Podhoretz for roughly 45 minutes at the White House as the patriarch of neoconservatism argued that the United States should bomb Iran's nuclear facilities.

The meeting was not on the president's public schedule.

Rove was silent throughout, though he took notes. The president listened diligently, Podhoretz said as he recounted the conversation months later, but he "didn't tip his hand."

"I did say to [the president], that people ask: Why are you spending all this time negotiating sanctions? Time is passing. I said, my friend [Robert] Kagan wrote a column which he said you were giving 'futility its chance.' And both he and Karl Rove burst out laughing.

"It struck me," Podhoretz added, "that if they really believed that there was a chance for these negotiations and sanctions to work, they would not have laughed. They would have got their backs up and said, 'No, no, it's not futile, there's a very good chance.' "

Podhoretz walked out of the meeting neither deterred nor assured the president would attack the Persian state.

Yet prior to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to New York for the United Nations' General Assembly, Podhoretz said he believes that "Bush is going to hit" Iran before the end of his presidency.

His assumption is based on intellectual instinct.

If Podhoretz were merely another old man of the chattering class, his intellectual instincts would hardly be worth pondering. But Podhoretz, after a half-century in argument, remains fiercely relevant.

He is a senior foreign policy adviser to Republican front-runner Rudy Giuliani. He participates in weekly conference calls with the campaign and says he is in constant contact via e-mail with the foreign policy team. The meeting with the president was at Podhoretz's request.

No less a figure than Rush Limbaugh said on Wednesday, during his radio show, that Podhoretz's most recent book is "a no-holds-barred, brilliant explanation of just what we face around the world, not just here in our country."

That book, "World War IV: The Long Struggle Against Islamofascism," is not so much a study of the "Islamofascism" he argues Americans must fight, as it is a treatise justifying his own fight. He indicts the foes of neoconservatism (of which there are many), and

defends the Bush doctrine of pre-emption (a task



few would attempt today).

Podhoretz sometimes seems to be the last neoconservative still in the political arena.

One of the movement's formative minds, Francis Fukuyama, has recanted. Paul Wolfowitz ingloriously left the White House and was later pushed off the world stage, quite literally, after his brief stint leading the World Bank.

Dick Cheney, their consummate paleoconservative ally, has seen his influence over the president diminish.

Then there is Iraq.

If an idea is only as good as its implementation, the protracted war in Iraq has left neoconservatives struggling to prove they had a good idea.

Undeterred, Podhoretz plods onward. He remains the unabashed hawk. History will redeem him, Iraq and this president, Podhoretz asserts.

"When this war's won — I don't say if, I say when; I am uncharacteristically optimistic — what will happen is the political configuration of the entire region will be changed," he insisted.

"That will involve a replacement of all the despotisms with regimes that are on the way to becoming free societies."

This was a characteristic neoconservative comment in 2003, at the outset of the war in Iraq.

But Podhoretz is still saying it four years later, sitting in his Upper East Side Manhattan apartment between pictures of his grandchildren and the archives of *Commentary*, where he was the editor for 35 years.

The nation's highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, is framed in his living room. Bush bestowed it in 2004, at the very time that Democrats were attacking him for a war that was not going as advertised.

Podhoretz now finds himself defending both the rosy picture he and fellow neoconservatives painted in the run-up to war, as well as the reasons America has been involved in it longer now than World War II.

It is world war that dominates Podhoretz's work today. He argues that World War III was the Cold War and that World War IV is the war on terrorism, a view echoed by the likes of Clinton-era CIA Director James Woolsey.

Only when the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are understood as one larger conflict, Podhoretz argues, can one grasp the gravity of the struggle before the United States.

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THE BUSH DOCTRINE — as he summarizes it, “to make the Middle East safe for America by making it safe for democracy” — puts democratization at the top of the agenda.

During the Cold War containment was the priority; democracy was secondary. Neoconservatives, by contrast, argue that democracy is a means to an end.

Perhaps ironically, democracy may be one of the great impediments to Podhoretz’s getting his way. A good portion of his book is devoted to arguing why the president should press on despite the domestic unpopularity of the war in Iraq — effectively short-circuiting democracy here in America.

He does acknowledge that after Vietnam, Americans became impatient with war, especially when it seems mismanaged and ill-conceived (which he argues Iraq was not).

Still, Podhoretz says, “We have to find a way to fight the war with the people we now are.”

Podhoretz cannot be dismissed as an ideological outlier. Despite a majority of Americans favoring a withdrawal from Iraq, a substantial minority subscribe to his argument that the war there is part of a larger one.

As recently as this summer, according to the Gallup Poll, 44 percent of Americans considered the war in Iraq “to be part of the war on terrorism which began on Sept. 11, 2001.”

But when he details his worldview, he severs himself from the bulk of foreign policy wonks, both conservative and liberal.

Podhoretz argues the war in Iraq has not empowered Iran. He believes that Iraq had biological and chemical weapons, but they were likely shipped out to Syria. And, says the man with the ear of the current and possibly next president, the war in Iraq is a success.

“The seeds of this democratization are planted,” as Podhoretz describes Iraq. “The opposition to this process of democratization turned out to be much more ferocious than anybody anticipated, including me. So it took a while for our people to learn how to deal with it,” he continued.

The greatest proof that Podhoretz is right, he insisted, is the very intensity of attacks in Iraq.

“If the enemy of that process [of democratization] thought it was a failure, they wouldn’t be blowing themselves up to frustrate it or derail it,” he argued.

“They agree that this is not only happening, but that it is a danger to them. They agree with Bush. They agree with me,” Podhoretz chuckled.

“That’s why they are fighting so hard.”