

# interview

by Radek Sikorski

## PAUL WOLFOWITZ

*The US deputy secretary of defence, and a leading force in American neoconservatism, challenges Europe to back the spread of democracy and explains why America is not an empire*

**I**F A HAWK IS someone who knows his mind and speaks it clearly, then Paul Wolfowitz, aged 60, is a hawk. But in other respects he fails to conform to the European idea of an American conservative. He has spent most of his career as a forceful promoter of democracy and humanitarian intervention. He sided with the captive nations of the Soviet empire before it was fashionable. Then in Reagan's state department he pushed the autocrats in Indonesia, the Philippines and South Korea towards reform. As the number three in the Pentagon in the HW Bush administration, he helped assemble the coalition that expelled Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. A former ambassador to Indonesia and dean of Johns Hopkins University, Wolfowitz is a tough-minded intellectual, with an academic background in international relations, who is now close to the driving seat in Washington. We met in the depths of the Pentagon on 3rd November, just after polls had closed. As I readied my tape machine and Wolfowitz chomped a salad, an adjutant came in to tell us John Kerry had conceded. The rumour-mill tips Wolfowitz as George W Bush's next national security adviser.

**RADEK SIKORSKI:** Do you feel that with George Bush's re-election your policies have been vindicated?

**PAUL WOLFOWITZ:** I think the good sense of the American voter has been vindicated. Americans understand a war is going on and they clearly prefer George Bush as a leader in that war. One of the polling figures that held up dramatically in the president's favour by, I

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think, a two to one margin, was that he is a stronger leader. The other one was that you could believe what he says and that *he* believes what he says. This, by the way, was the quality that made Reagan so successful. Americans like to know where their leaders stand, they don't like leaders who make decisions based on polls. It's almost a paradox of democracy. But, in any case, you can't measure success or failure until you're finished, and we're in the middle of a war. Would you feel vindicated by the Normandy landings?

**RS:** Now that the election is over are you going to take the gloves off?

**PW:** If you're talking about Falluja, it's been clear for some time that April's experiment [US military commanders loosened their siege of the city, turning over the task of ending the insurgency to a new force of Iraqi soldiers] was not going to succeed. But you should know that the president was incredibly scrupulous about keeping political considerations out of national security decisions. I'm not a politician, but I would guess that it would have helped the president in the polls if we had gone on to the offence in Falluja last month. The main issue is that the Iraqi government should be on board and I think you can see that Prime Minister Allawi's patience is running out.

**RS:** You recently went to Warsaw where your family came from [Wolfowitz was born in New York; his father, a mathematician, was from Warsaw but emigrated during Poland's brief interwar independence]. You went to the Umschlagplatz, from where the German Nazis transported Jews to Treblinka for gassing, including perhaps members of your own family. How did that affect you?

**PW:** Less dramatically than people like to say. While the Holocaust is unique in the way the Germans performed it, in an industrial fashion, there have been other genocides. I was actually more affected in a positive way at seeing the transformation in the city from what it must have been—not only during the war but through the years of communism. And it was just an unmitigated pleasure to sit in this lovely Warsaw apartment on a beautiful fall day with the sun coming through the window and talk to Jan Nowak, who is the hero who brought news of the Holocaust to Britain and America. And to think that neither of us would have dreamed as recently as 20 years ago that he would ever live in a free Warsaw.

**RS:** Do you think the Holocaust still colours America's attitude to the middle east and Israel?

**PW:** What Saddam did in Iraq was certainly genocide—not as systematic as Hitler's, not as fundamentally racist as Hitler's, but absolutely horrible. And for various reasons, the world looked the other way. Jan Nowak made an observation about this: when he went back later to the archives and saw the notes of his conversations in London and Washington in the early 1940s, the subject of the extermination of Jews wasn't mentioned, even though he had emphasised it.

I said, "What do you attribute it to?" He replied, "wartime inconvenience." It was an uncomfortable fact and people didn't want to know, just as they didn't want to know about Srebrenica. When the memorial at Srebrenica was dedicated, some said "if only we had known." Well, the world knew. The world knew for three years and still the Bosnians were not armed and the conflict was not dealt with.

I remember arguing with people who were in favour of the arms embargo on Bosnia in 1992, saying, look, I think it's immoral, but put that issue aside. If we insist that the Bosnians can't defend themselves then sooner or later we'll be going in to protect them. This is what happened. Afghanistan is a huge success because we empowered the Afghans. And it seems to me that it's a good strategic principle to help people to defend themselves. One of the most powerful images that stuck with me in Iraq was when a colonel in the 101st airborne division explained to his troops that what they were doing was like what his father, or their grandfathers, did in Japan and Germany: they're not just defeating evil in terrorism and Ba'athism, they're creating new allies. And one of these days I think Afghanistan and Iraq will be big contributors to the progress in the middle east that we desperately need.

**RS:** As you say, the US has had its biggest recent successes when it has empowered its friends to do what they want to do anyway. Why didn't you do that in Iraq? Why couldn't we have had Iraqis liberating Baghdad, winning credibility from defeating Saddam and then becoming the new Iraqi government? Why did we have to have US soldiers to do it for them?

**PW:** Why was it necessary to have such a large US role? This is a point that is totally misunderstood and almost never explained. It allows people to say that I have held the same view on Iraq for the last 10 years. In fact, before 11th September, those of us who said that it was important to end the hypocrisy of saying "we want the liberation of Iraq but we won't do anything about it" were never advocates of *invading* Baghdad. There were some who said we shouldn't use US ground forces at all. I was a little more willing to say it might take US ground forces to create a sanctuary in northern or southern Iraq. We could have done it in Basra, which is the second largest city in the country and which *did* welcome us with open arms once the Fedayeen were cleared out. But 11th

September and the anthrax attacks which came immediately after changed the calculation. Rather than leave Saddam alone forever to get more dangerous, you had to take him on and take him on quickly.

**RS:** You were one of the people who got it right about the cold war. But are we not in danger of drawing the wrong lesson? The people of central Europe liberated themselves with western help because they wanted democracy. But in places like Cuba, where the desire for democracy clashes with an even more powerful force, nationalism, we have not won. Democracy can win in those places which do not have a nationalist grievance against the US. If this is right—how does it apply to the middle east?

**PW:** I'm not sure I agree with the proposition. Philippine nationalism, for example, is somewhat anti-American and it hasn't prevented them from embracing democracy. Korean nationalism is very,

very powerful. But our relationship with Korea is far better today because we supported their democratic transition 20 years ago and we're not burdened with helping to keep a tyranny in power. Arab nationalism everywhere has an anti-American slant. But Arab democrats are excited about what this president has done.

**RS:** But the US supports undemocratic governments in Egypt and elsewhere. So how much is the project of exporting

democracy to the Arab world a real one and how much part of a propaganda war to help justify Iraq?

**PW:** Export of democracy isn't really a good phrase. We're trying to remove the shackles on democracy. What you would hope is that governments can be encouraged on a path of gradual reform because that's the best way to avoid the sort of cataclysm that will come otherwise. It is also much tougher where you've got a home-grown tyranny than where you had one that was basically the product of occupation, like Poland, because society gets to be more thoroughly corrupted. In this sense Iraq is more like Serbia.

**RS:** Britain, Italy, Poland and Ukraine supported you in Iraq with troops, but their publics are sceptical.

**PW:** Some of the hostility among European publics comes from basic, deep-seated factual misrepresentations. Left-wing academics say that this is a war for oil or for Halliburton or other absurdities. Political leaders could take on some of this falsehood and demagoguery. If the US president talked as regularly and as critically about Europe as some European leaders



Paul Wolfowitz with US troops in Baghdad

talk about the US, there would probably be a lot more anti-European feeling in this country than there is. And I am surprised that given the American sacrifice in Europe, 50, 60 years ago, more Europeans don't think that the Iraqi people or the Afghan people are entitled to a similar consideration. It's astonishing to hear liberals and socialists, whether in Europe or here, effectively saying that Saddam's fascist, genocidal dictatorship should have been left alone.

**RS:** The US would have won more support in Europe if it had justified war on humanitarian grounds—Europe accepted war against Serbia on that basis.

**PW:** But we would never have had 15 votes in the UN on that proposition. The UN was what forced us down the WMD path, which was a legitimate argument. When the president first went to the UN, he made three arguments. He talked about terrorism, he talked about WMD and he talked about abuse of the Iraqi people. Even with the UN resolution, we might have pushed harder on this issue. On the other hand, the Syrians weren't going to vote for a resolution that endorsed removing Saddam for the sake of the Iraqis.

**RS:** The leader of the British Tories, the pro-Atlanticist Michael Howard, was cold shouldered by the White House because he dared to criticise Tony Blair's presentation on Iraq. So if you want to be received at the White House, do you have to show obedience these days?

**PW:** If we expected obedience we wouldn't have any relations with Europe at all. It's usually our practice to meet with politicians from across the spectrum.

Look, we've been through 50 years now of the most successful alliance in history. It's had its downs. We're in the middle of a war which hasn't been won yet and it's tough and nobody likes a war. I can understand people being anti-war, even if they know all the facts. But I still believe that freedom is a powerful force that will help sort this out. It's also a glue that holds us together. Who would have dreamed ten years ago that a Nato force would be keeping the peace in Kabul, so that Afghanistan could build a democracy? There's a lot that's creative and good.

**RS:** Conservatives are suspicious of projects to change human nature. They oppose social engineering in domestic policy. Yet here you are, full of ideological zeal, crafting a new form of government for people very different from us. Is this a contradiction?

**PW:** If you put it that way, you create a contradiction. We're not trying to graft our system of government on to people who are different from us. We're trying to remove shackles that keep them from having what they want. And it's astonishing how many of them want something that's similar to what we in the west have. I was assistant secretary of state for east Asia

when we first confronted Marcos under the Reagan administration. People said: "What are you doing? We'll end up with what Carter got in Iran." But we pressed Marcos very hard in the Philippines and I think the proof is in the outcome. The contradiction is to say that allowing people to choose their government freely is to impose our ideas on them. There was a wonderful moment at a conference here in Washington where someone said it's arrogant of us to impose our values on the Arab world, and an Arab got up and said it's arrogant of you to say these are your values because they are universal values.

**RS:** On the eve of the Iraq war, I asked one of your colleagues whether it was worth gaining Iraq and losing Europe. He answered that when we win, European foreign ministry spokesmen will be falling over themselves to prove that they were with us all along. But this has not happened. Europe is not reconciled. Aren't you worried that France is winning the argument over Iraq politically?

**PW:** It's much too soon to tell what the effect of winning the war on Iraq will be, because it's still going on. And you can't make a decision about something as important as what to do about Iraq based on a public opinion poll. Eventually, opinion will follow the facts.

**RS:** But the Iraq war has created a European public opinion for the first time, which is

anti-American, even in countries that joined the war. **PW:** I believe that we have many fundamental common interests with Europe based in no small measure on common values. And that in the medium to long run, that's what will prevail. The agenda of reform in the Arab world that the president is promoting is going to benefit Europe more than the US. If we can find a way to produce the two-state solution that the president wants for Israel and Palestine, that's going to transform our relations. But if you want to make the kinds of changes that I think are necessary, you're not going to get them done if you are too deferential to the lowest common denominator. For example, a lot of bad things happened in the Balkans because, on both sides of the Atlantic, people were unwilling to make tough decisions for a number of years. And then when they finally did and it's a success—well, who now remembers that Europeans thought Americans in the Clinton administration were overbearing?

**RS:** With the benefit of hindsight and now that the election campaign is over, what would you say could have been done differently in Iraq?

**PW:** People make a lot about the decision to dismiss the Iraqi army. But I don't think people are shooting at Americans and blowing up schools because we dismissed the Iraqi army. When people talk about why Iraq is as difficult as it is, they always start and finish

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with a list of American mistakes. Nobody ever talks about the enemy. It would be like saying why the battle of the bulge was tough without ever mentioning the German army. Saddam Hussein didn't stop fighting us, at least until he was captured in December last year. Al-Zarqawi didn't surrender when Baghdad fell. He stepped up his efforts. There are all these organizations that are unheard of in Europe and barely known in the US that people ought to know about. There was the M-14 division of the Iraqi intelligence service, its so-called "anti-terrorism" division, which specialised in hijackings and bombings, kidnappings and assassinations. There was the M-16 division, which perfected new bombing techniques. Many of these guys are out in Falluja and Ramadi in the western parts of Iraq today making bombs. A fellow named Abu Ibrahim spent 20 years in Iraq developing these techniques. He can fashion plastic explosives in the shape of decorative wall hangings. He was putting bombs in suitcases on American airplanes in 1982. If you don't understand that the people who killed and raped and murdered and tortured for 35 years are not quitting and still think they can win, then you won't understand what we're fighting.

**RS:** In January I was in Iraq and was surprised to find electricity is free. No wonder there are shortages.

**PW:** Yeah. There's more electricity now than there was before the war. Electricity shortages matter partly because it makes people unhappy but also because it makes them suspicious of us. They say, "If you can put a man on the moon, why can't you fix our electricity or clean up the slums?" If you proceed from that false premise, then you arrive at a false conclusion, which is that Americans must be here for some ulterior motive. And then if some former Ba'athist comes by and says, "Boy, those are nice children you have, I sure hope you're thinking about their future," it's intimidating. The main thing the enemy can do in Iraq is to intimidate and we cannot compete and wouldn't want to compete in that. But in order for Iraqis to fight, they need to have a lot of confidence in us, that we're not going to cut and run. And if electricity doesn't work, it undercuts that faith. I think that one of the benefits of President Bush's re-election is that both good Iraqis and bad Iraqis will begin to think that the game is up for the bad guys. But nothing can be taken for granted. Any gain you make lasts only two or three months, unless you build on it.

**RS:** The war on terror is a war on the radical Muslim insurgency, in which you have to kill the irreconcilables, but which will be decided in the hearts and minds of the majority of moderate Muslims. What did you learn about this as ambassador to Indonesia?

**PW:** Indonesia is wonderful. A country of more than 220m people—with the largest Muslim population of any country in the world—and it does give you a view of a certain slice of this problem. It's a somewhat atypical slice because it's not an Arab country and it has a

strong tradition of religious tolerance. I would say that over 90 per cent of Indonesians reject the extremists. Even people who want to make Indonesia a Muslim state don't support terrorism. But in a country of 220m people, even if just one ten-thousandth of the population were terrorists, you would have 22,000 terrorists. In fact, there are probably far, far fewer. And yet, they can do enormous damage, as we saw with the explosion in Bali. Part of the challenge in a country like Indonesia is to create conditions where mainstream Muslims are comfortable denouncing the terrorists. This is one of the reasons President Bush has been so careful not to offend Islam and to stress the Muslim nature of our allies. There's a close analogy with the early cold war when some people said that the enemy was socialism. I think the people who won the cold war were the ones who recognised that the greatest allies in the fight against communism were democratic socialists and trade unionists.

**RS:** Was it wise to brush Nato aside when it sprang to the US's defence after 9/11?

**PW:** That's a myth. I was at that meeting and the reporting about our brushing Nato aside is just wrong. I think some of it came from a feeling that we ought to have had a detailed set of requests for Nato. We weren't asking Nato to do more because we hadn't figured out yet what we needed. But we were delighted having Nato's AWACs defending US air space. We were delighted at the invocation of Article 5. We supported Lord Robertson and everything he was trying to do. And it's hardly brushing Nato aside to have all these Nato countries helping to secure Afghanistan today. On the other hand, it turned out that when we did ask people to do things, just in Afghanistan, most countries strained to do it. Some people are doing a lot, especially new Nato members.

**RS:** Is it still in America's interest to support European integration or should the US work to disaggregate Europe into its constituent states?

**PW:** I would put much more emphasis on how we relate to Europe than whether we're going to affect its evolution. But having said that, there are European countries that are prepared to work more closely with us than others. And I don't think that we should necessarily go with the lowest common denominator in Europe. To pick an example that is ten years behind us, I think it was President Chirac who tried to get the US to do more on Bosnia and we responded positively to him in the end.

**RS:** How does Chechnya fit into the war on terror?

**PW:** The Chechens have legitimate political concerns. But the fact that some of them pursue those ends by means of terrorism puts any country that's serious about opposing terrorism in a very difficult position. And you have to be absolutely clear in denouncing atrocities like what took place in Beslan. But I think it is not condoning terrorism to support a political solution to the Chechen conflict.

**RS:** What would be your desired model of co-operation with Europe over Iran? Can Europe be the good cop and America the bad cop?

**PW:** The hammer, like in Korea, is not military, but economic. What our Asian partners can do to bring North Korea around economically is vastly more than what we can do. The Iranian equation is more complex and the country is open to political influence in a way that North Korea is not. Europeans have economic leverage on Iran they could exercise.

**RS:** Would the US also use carrots, for example, by recognising the mullahs? If the policy is regime change, then you can hardly blame them for trying to insulate themselves by acquiring nuclear weapons.

**PW:** The policy is that Iran should stop promoting terrorism, should stop pursuing WMD and should stop trying to destroy the middle east peace process.

**RS:** And if those conditions are met will you then restore relations?

**PW:** One positive thing about Iran is that there's more room for political evolution in that country than in most comparable dictatorships. The trouble is that a few years ago they had an election in which three quarters of the population voted for the opposition candidate, but it turned out that winning the election didn't change the government. It is possible to conceive of Iran going in the direction where they have a government that respects the rights of its people and truly represents them.

**RS:** Imagine you were a reasonable foreigner and you saw that US intelligence had failed to prevent 9/11, failed to capture Osama and failed to get it right about WMD in Iraq, would you trust US assessments about Iran or North Korea?

**PW:** Part of the problem is that people both here and in Europe tend to confuse spectacular technical intelligence with intelligence overall. Just because we can read licence plates from outer space, they think we must know what goes on in North Korea or Iraq. Every intelligence service in the world, including the leading European intelligence services, seem to have got it wrong about Saddam's WMD. In fact, a lot of our information came from European sources. Intelligence is by nature an uncertain business. You're having to make a lot of decisions under huge uncertainties. That is the nature of this fight against terrorism. If you read the 9/11 commission report, the most powerful impression is that even two or three years afterwards, even with the benefit of having captured the mastermind [Khalid Sheikh Mohammed] and having extensive interrogations, there are still large areas about it that we don't understand. So, to expect to get perfect insight into the terrorist networks is an unreasonable expecta-

tion. You want your intelligence to help as much as it can. But we have to create a world in which these terrorist networks don't enjoy sanctuaries.

**RS:** The US president used to be seen as the leader of the free world rather than just president of one country and America used to be seen as a benign global empire. Now, after 9/11, understandably, this is a more patriotic, perhaps even a more nationalistic country. But won't the price of running a nationalistic American empire be much higher than managing a co-operative one? The first Gulf war, for example, paid for itself, whereas the Iraq war is expensive.

**PW:** The premise of your question is that we're out to run an empire, but there is no American empire. Look at Japan and Korea. They were part of this so-called empire in the cold war. After the second world war and the Korean war, we invested heavily in the defence and economic systems of countries like Japan and Korea—hardly an imperial undertaking. I would submit that we have benefited enormously from their strength and their ability to stand on their own feet. They're now contributing to the rest of the world.

We're so much better off with a Japan as a strong trading partner than a Japan as a basket case. If people want to redefine the word "empire" to mean this as an empire, then it's just semantics. We are not trying to control these countries so we can exploit their

resources. We're trying to enable these countries to stand on their own feet and our experience says that when they do so, we're better off. It's back to the absurdity of saying we're trying to impose our ideas on other people when we want to help them become democracies. There's more legitimacy to the question of whether we are really prepared to live with what they produce when they become democratic. There's an uncertainty about the democratic process and there's always a danger that bad people will get elected. But it's a funny empire that relies on releasing basic human desires to be free and prosperous and live in peace. One of the things about this moment in history is that nobody really thinks they can produce an army, a navy or an air force that can take on the US. That should channel human competitiveness into more productive and peaceful pursuits.

**RS:** How do you want to crown your political career?  
**PW:** It's very important to win this war in Iraq and then win the peace that has to follow. We must make progress on the president's broad middle east initiative. We need to solidify the huge gains in Afghanistan because we're engaged, not by our choice, but by the choice of the extremists, in a struggle that will go on for decades. I just hope that when my children go through my papers someday, they will say, well, he helped to get us on the right course. ■

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## It's a peculiar empire that relies on releasing basic human desires to be free and prosperous

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