
Book Review

Government ‘The Way Dick Likes It’

by Michele Steinberg

The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O’Neill

by Ron Suskind

New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004

348 pp. with Index, hard cover, \$26.00

This is a scary book, which tells us from the inside, through the reminiscences of former Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill—backed up with original documents—that “something’s rotten” on the Potomac. It centers around Dick Cheney’s Rasputin control over an incompetent President, who can be “revved up” to give orders based on pure fabrications.

A word of caution to readers is appropriate: You don’t know *a thing* about this book from the carefully crafted press reviews, interview shows, and talk-fests that have concentrated on a couple of its anecdotes. One gets the impression that either the reviewers didn’t read the book, or they were working off of a “Fact Sheet” prepared by Cheney’s office. That’s the kind of low-life tactic from the White House that author Ron Suskind describes time and again, as told to him by O’Neill.

We have heard Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld say he called O’Neill to tell him not to write the book; we do know that the Administration immediately announced that an investigation has been opened up against O’Neill for the crime of leaking classified documents. We do know that Cheney told the world, “Do not believe O’Neill’s book,” as he left for his trip to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January. Maybe O’Neill should compare notes with Ambassador Joe Wilson about what happens to people when they cross Dick Cheney.

Paul O’Neill knows his Republicans, and he is warning them about a nest of fanatics who have seized the Presidency. And, O’Neill knows his Presidents—he served in top positions under Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and George H.W. Bush. O’Neill and his wife have been close friends with Don-

ald Rumsfeld and his wife, and with Dick Cheney and his wife. O’Neill worked closely with Alan Greenspan, whom he sought out as an ally against a bunch of American Enterprise Institute ideologues who didn’t care a damn about reality. And it must be said, that O’Neill is rather charitable to Bush, who is obviously in over his head.

O’Neill thought he was walking into a situation where experienced, accomplished veterans would provide leadership to a bunch of “kids rolling around on the lawn.” Instead, he walked into a snakepit. One thing is clear—Dick Cheney was in charge.

Describing conversations between Cheney and O’Neill in late 2002—when O’Neill tried to enlist Cheney in a fight to end the propaganda that was being aired at NSC meetings and come up with serious briefings—Suskind writes: “They talked about everything that was apparent. The President was caught in an echo chamber of his own making, cut off from everyone other than a circle around him that’s tiny and getting smaller and in concert on everything—a circle that conceals him from public view and keeps him away from the one thing he needs most: honest, disinterested perspectives about what’s real and what the hell he might do about it. But then ‘I realized why Dick just nodded along when I said all this, over and over, and nothing ever changed . . . *because this is the way Dick likes it.*’

“But O’Neill had stopped trying to discern where Cheney ended and the President began. Not only was it not clear—it might not be pertinent. . . . It was clear to O’Neill that Cheney and a handful of others had become ‘a praetorian guard’ that encircled the President. In terms of bringing new, transforming ideas to the Oval Office, ‘that store is closed.’”

The Iraq War

The book confirms the central role of Dick Cheney in devastating detail, and confirms the “government within a government” structure about which *EIR* readers were educated in the LaRouche in 2004 pamphlet, *Children of Satan: The Ignoble Liars Behind Bush’s No-Exit War*.

For example: Jan. 30, 2001, the first National Security Council meeting. Bush gathered “the principals” for the first time, to discuss the Middle East, and the agenda was regime change in Iraq. Each Cabinet member brought his or her deputy—and Cheney had more chips than anyone, since the deputies were stacked with his own, anti-Saddam Hussein underlings: his National Security Advisor, Lewis Libby; and Paul Wolfowitz, who was ostensibly Rumsfeld’s deputy.

Suskind writes, “Was there already an ‘in’ group and an ‘out’ group?”

“The meeting had seemed scripted. Rumsfeld had said little, Cheney nothing at all.” But O’Neill and author Suskind, both old hands in watching the Washington scene, are well aware of “the invisible hand” that can operate, especially when it comes to neo-conservatives.

It opened with a complete policy change, with Bush an-

nouncing, tersely: “We’re going to tilt back to Israel. . . . Clinton overreached [in the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks] . . . that’s why we’re in trouble.”

The U.S. will “disengage,” he said.

Suddenly, Bush asked, “has anyone met Ariel Sharon?” Bush praised Sharon, and told the Cabinet how he had taken a helicopter ride with Sharon over the Palestinian territories, noting “it looked bad.” Powell, who seemed surprised to be told to “disengage” from the peace process, protested that “The consequences would be dire, especially for the Palestinians,” but Bush waved this off, saying, “maybe . . . that’s the best way. . . . Sometimes a show of strength by one side can really clarify things.”

Then it was on to Iraq. CIA Director George Tenet was called forward, to produce his tabletop-sized, blueprint-like aerial maps of Iraqi factories—claiming these were evidence of chemical weapon production. Cheney broke his silence, and excitedly called the deputies to come to the table and look.

O’Neill’s questioning of the interpretation of the aerial photos was brushed off. Bush handed out assignments for the *hows* to “get Saddam”—financial warfare from O’Neill, new sanctions with teeth from Powell, and military plans from the Defense Department.

O’Neill “wondered when, exactly, the *whys*—why Saddam, why now—were to be discussed.”

It was on return to his office that O’Neill understood what had really happened at the meeting, when he opened a Rumsfeld memorandum that was waiting for him, titled, “Talking Points, FY01 and FY02-07 Budget Issues.” Suskind notes, “It was not a traditional budget document”; rather, Rumsfeld detailed “why the military budget was due for a dramatic increase” by using “a five-point illustration of a dire global landscape, the underlying ideas that were now guiding foreign policy.”

Suskind’s inclusion of the full text of this section of the Rumsfeld memo is one of the most enjoyable parts of this book. It allows current historians, concerned citizens, and legislators to see what really went on.

O’Neill recognized the memo as a rework of the 1992 Defense Policy Guidance, which was “the plan written by Paul Wolfowitz, then the undersecretary for policy under Defense Secretary Dick Cheney.”

Rumsfeld’s January 2001 memo warned that after the breakup of the U.S.S.R., it was possible for “the poorest countries” to obtain the “most destructive military technology ever devised”; and “We cannot prevent them from doing so. The threats can emerge very rapidly and with little or no warning.” Suskind also notes that Rumsfeld had already brought in deputies like Wolfowitz and Doug Feith, who had believed as “Rummy” did, in 1991, that it had been wrong to leave Saddam Hussein in power.

The Cheney/Wolfowitz plan was also linked to the “Revolution in Military Affairs” ideas of Andy Marshall, who ran the Pentagon’s Office of Net Assessments for nearly 30 years.

This revolution would mean “smaller, swifter” wars that would depend a great deal on “sophisticated, intelligence-driven air attack.” This network and their plans had been on the outs during the Clinton years, and “military traditionalists [had] plenty of ammunition to halt initiatives by Marshall” and his supporters. Rummy, Cheney and company were out to change that, immediately.

Suskind reveals that the group-think that O’Neill observed had been in the making since 1998, when a team of Condi Rice and Wolfowitz was put together and began hammering the dumb governor of Texas into shape, briefing him intensely every week.

Suskind leaves out some of the important details that are known to *EIR* readers—that these trainers called themselves, “the Vulcans”; that they were mainly followers of the fascist philosopher Leo Strauss; and that their godfathers were Cheney and George Shultz, President Reagan’s Secretary of State. Details of these Vulcan training experiences are sketchy, writes Suskind, with the exception of the “loquacious” Richard Perle, who is quoted boasting, “The first time I met Bush 43, I knew he was different. . . . he *didn’t know very much*.”

And so, the “praetorian guard” about which O’Neill worries, is defined. Suskind writes that “those who had presided over the inception” of these ideas “would preside over their execution. Cheney would offer oversight and protection; Rumsfeld would be the point man.” Wolfowitz backed Rummy up “from the inside,” while Richard Perle would back him up “from the outside” through the Defense Policy Advisory Group, which “would counsel the Pentagon, the White House, and the CIA.”

The Post-9/11 Anomaly

There is more to this book than Iraq.

O’Neill warned about a disaster coming down on the U.S. economy. He questioned the existence of the so-called budget surplus, and warned that job loss and the slowing down of the economy would erase the surplus completely. To curtail the tax-cut mania, he sought out lengthy private meetings with Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan, before O’Neill had even been sworn in to office. A big surplus number—say \$5 trillion over ten years—was like “pumping ether” into the executive branch. “O’Neill said, do the numbers. Take out the trust funds, the untouchables: Nearly half of the total surplus would go to obligations for Social Security and Medicare. What was left?—\$2 trillion plus.” It wasn’t a surplus if you took out Bush’s desired \$1.6 trillion tax cut. Lawrence Lindsey and others went to war against O’Neill over this opposition.

That was January 2001. In January 2002, O’Neill started more trouble, after Enron declared bankruptcy. Enron’s CEO Kenneth Lay had called both O’Neill and Commerce Secretary Don Evans, begging for government intervention to prevent the rating agencies from downgrading Enron. O’Neill

said “No,” and began a campaign to force new laws and regulations to make CEOs bear the entire responsibility for wrongdoing by their companies. CEOs began badgering the White House to shut O’Neill up; “the scandals were hurting the President.” Karl Rove was worried that “anger about Enron . . . tapped into submerged doubts about Bush and Harken Energy, Cheney and Halliburton.”

By the end of 2002, O’Neill was out. The last third of the book is a rapidly paced description of a brittle Administration, which O’Neill at one point compares to “the last days of Nixon.”

With the demise of Enron, Global Crossing, and dozens of other firms, even the usually unflappable Alan Greenspan, is, by page 226, “lifting his voice like Lear, railing at heaven’s gate,” telling the nation’s top financial officials, “There’s been too much gaming of the system, until it is broke. Capitalism is not working! There has been a corrupting of the system of capitalism.”

Is it accidental, suggests O’Neill to author Suskind, that at the point of this domestic mess, the “in” group again turned to foreign affairs and war. O’Neill notes the importance of Cheney’s Aug. 26, 2002 speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention, “where he raised the specter of Pearl Harbor and said the United States could find itself at the mercy of a nuclear-armed Saddam if it failed to act soon.” Neo-con insider William Kristol gloated, “When Cheney talks, it’s Bush.”

O’Neill says that as Treasury Secretary, he saw two “ideological” disasters—the Iraq war, and the tax cuts obsession. He says that he decided to concentrate on the one about which he could actually do something—tax cuts. Perhaps that was a mistake, but it was the choice that O’Neill made.

But there is the anomaly of the Sept. 11 counter-measures. When the attack occurred, O’Neill was in Tokyo, but he rushed back and was immediately included in “war cabinet” meetings, including the well-known weekend at Camp David.

Suskind and O’Neill name a few—but not all—who were at the weekend session where Bush decided the counter-measures: Bush, Cheney, Rice, Powell, Rumsfeld, O’Neill, Ashcroft, Tenet. Their spouses were invited; Mrs. Powell declined to attend. Wolfowitz made an intense pitch for war against Iraq, portraying the “weak” Saddam Hussein regime as low-hanging fruit, that could give the United States a quick victory and an example for all the world—just as it had been laid out, Suskind reminds us, in both the Cheney/Wolfowitz Defense Policy Guidance plan of 1992, and the Rumsfeld budget memo of January 2001.

Yet, Wolfowitz was apparently cut down by a single response from White House Chief of Staff Andy Card, who said, there’s “nothing new” here.

Many wanted to jump on reports about this book as as “proof” that the Bush Administration planned the Iraq war from the “git-go”; and maybe that is what O’Neill and Suskind believe. Why, then, was Wolfowitz rebuffed? There is still more to the story.