

HUBRIS

The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and
the Selling of the Iraq War

MICHAEL ISIKOFF

AND

DAVID CORN



CROWN PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK

Everything, everything, everything was connected to Saddam.

—DANIEL PIPES, MIDDLE EAST RESEARCHER

4

One Strange Theory

NOT LONG after the 9/11 attacks, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz dispatched former CIA Director James Woolsey on a secret trip to London.

Wolfowitz was not expecting Woolsey to come up with important new leads related to the events of September 11. Instead, Woolsey's unorthodox mission was primarily to press the Brits for any evidence they might have that would validate the theories of an eccentric academic named Laurie Mylroie. A onetime Harvard assistant professor, Mylroie was convinced she had unraveled mysteries no one in the CIA or the FBI had been able (or willing) to divine, mysteries she believed added up to a stunning and historic conclusion: Saddam was the mastermind behind much of the world's terrorism. In the aftermath of 9/11—with the U.S. government still trying to discern what precisely had happened and what should be done—Wolfowitz was focusing on far-fetched notions about Saddam promoted by this former college professor. But if Mylroie could be proven right—as both Wolfowitz and Woolsey ardently believed she was—her ideas could fundamentally shape the administration's response to those attacks. Her research, if validated, could provide the *casus belli* to wage war on Iraq.

Wolfowitz and Woolsey were just two members of a small crop of current and former U.S. officials who in recent years had become enamored of

Myroie's anti-Saddam work. The elaborate conspiracy theories she had propounded—dismissed as bizarre and implausible by the U.S. law enforcement and intelligence communities—would have enormous influence within the administration. It ultimately wouldn't matter whether Wolfowitz and Woolsey could find information to confirm her ideas. They and others had already accepted them and would act accordingly.

THREE days after September 11, the conservative American Enterprise Institute held a press briefing. Former UN ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, past House Speaker Newt Gingrich, AEI scholar (and Chalabi champion) David Wurmser, and AEI fellow Michael Ledeen were corralled into a conference room in downtown Washington to offer instant analysis to members of the media, government officials, and fellow think-tankers. "The shock has been very great," Kirkpatrick said. To explain it all, she first called on Myroie, another AEI fellow and panelist. Myroie got right to the point:

There has been no clear demonstration that Osama bin Laden was involved in Tuesday's assault on the United States, but there's been a lot of speculation to that effect, and it may turn out that he is. So assume that he is because I think the key question will be, how likely is it that Osama bin Laden's group or any other group carried out these attacks alone, unassisted by a state? I'd like to suggest that it is extremely unlikely—in fact, next to impossible.

Who, then, was *really* behind the attacks? Myroie had the answer: Iraq. There was no way, she insisted, that al-Qaeda could have pulled off 9/11 without the support of Saddam Hussein.

The ruffled-looking Myroie had been anticipating a moment like 9/11 for years. Finally, she thought, she might soon see the result of a decade of hard work: a war against Saddam. Her own personal odyssey—which had taken her from promoting Saddam's potential as a positive leader to decrying him as the leading source of evil in the world—was a key chapter in the war's backstory, a tale that also featured a band of like-minded policy wonks who had been pushing for a full-scale invasion of Iraq practically since the end of the first Persian Gulf War. Myroie and her neoconservative allies would demonstrate, perhaps beyond their most fanciful dreams, that a few committed souls could change the world—even if they didn't have their facts straight.

Paul
secret

new
odox
have
aurie
d she
le (or
his-
orld's
rying
owitz
rmer
owitz
ntally
vali-

f cur-
red of

MYLROIE made her reputation as a Middle East expert and a prodigious researcher in the 1980s, when she was a graduate student and then an assistant professor of political science at Harvard University. She was at that time a pragmatist regarding Saddam, arguably sympathetic to the tyrant. The Iraqi dictator, she pointed out then, was not an Islamic fanatic; he was not passionately anti-American. Saddam, she thought, could be turned into a U.S. ally in the Mideast. In a 1987 piece in *The New Republic*—headlined “Back Iraq: It’s Time for a U.S. ‘Tilt’”—Mylroie and Daniel Pipes, a pro-Israel hawk who worked with her at Harvard, called for the Reagan administration to swing behind Saddam’s regime in its ongoing war with Iran. The two advocated sending weapons to Iraq and upgrading the intelligence Washington was already providing Saddam. The pair noted that Iraq had moderated its view of Israel and the United States (with which it had restored relations in 1984, thanks in part to the effort of Donald Rumsfeld, whom Reagan dispatched to Iraq as an envoy in 1983). A shift toward Iraq, Mylroie and Pipes wrote, “could lay the basis for a fruitful relationship” that would enhance both U.S. and Israeli security interests.

Beyond writing about the Middle East, Mylroie was looking to change the region through back-channel, private diplomacy—and she aspired to be a behind-the-scenes peacemaker who would broker a deal between Saddam and Israel. Amatzia Baram, an influential University of Haifa professor and an Israeli expert on Iraq, recalled that he had encouraged Mylroie in this endeavor. “Yeah, I was somewhat hopeful there could be a normalization of relations,” he said. The pair hatched a plan: Mylroie would visit Iraq and approach high-level officials there to see if they might be interested in exploring talks with Israel. Baram took Mylroie to see Ezer Weizman, the legendary Israeli Air Service hero then serving in the Cabinet of the Likud-led Israeli government. “Ezer liked the idea,” according to Baram, and gave this unofficial diplomacy a green light.

In 1987, according to Baram, Mylroie went to Baghdad and met with Tariq Aziz, the foreign minister, and Nizar Hamdoon, the Iraqi ambassador to the United States. She then visited Israel. Later, she organized an unofficial meeting at Harvard between Hamdoon and two Israeli Army generals. Hamdoon was coy and ultimately noncommittal. The Israeli Army generals, according to Baram, went back home with “mixed feelings,” concluding

that Hamdoun was really just playing along as a way of placating the United States—not because Saddam's regime had any real desire to make peace. Mylroie's efforts at playing Henry Kissinger had gone nowhere.

But Mylroie continued to advocate engaging Saddam, even after the Iraqi dictator slaughtered tens of thousands of Kurds in what became known as the Anfal campaign of 1987 and 1988. That horrific attack caused the Reagan administration to formally condemn Iraq for its use of chemical weapons in September 1988. In May 1989, Mylroie wrote in *The Jerusalem Post* that Israel and the United States should not "poke" Iraq "with a stick" and should refrain from tossing "idle threats and harsh words" at Baghdad. She suggested Iraq might become a benign, if not positive, presence in the region. She pointed out that Saddam had even announced a program of democracy—including allowing freedom of speech and permitting opposition parties to operate—that should not be dismissed out of hand. The following March, *The Jerusalem Post* quoted Mylroie as saying that Israel and Iraq ought to try to reach an informal understanding through a third party—perhaps an oblique reference to her own back-channel efforts.

Whatever hopes she harbored of being a Middle East peacemaker were dashed on August 2, 1990, when Iraqi troops poured across the border and occupied Kuwait. Saddam's invasion crushed Mylroie—and turned her view of the world upside down. "Laurie was utterly horrified and aghast," Pipes recalled. "She was in a state of shock." Almost overnight, she turned against the dictator she had once wanted Washington to help, with the passion of one who felt personally betrayed.

After the invasion, Mylroie was asked by a New York publisher to collaborate with Judy Miller on a book on Saddam and the current crisis. Written in just twenty-one days, the paperback positioned Mylroie and Miller as two prominent experts on the evil and brutal ways of Iraq's dictator. ("Saddam Hussein loves *The Godfather*," they wrote.) An editor who worked on the book recalled that Mylroie often became obsessed with individual facts and exaggerated their importance: "She was capable of great insight and of investing the smallest detail with the most disproportionate weight. She was not always capable of making a straightforward, linear argument. Left to her own devices, she would seize on reeds she would think were redwoods." Miller, though, found Mylroie a fine collaborator. "It was a great match," Miller said later. "I learned an enormous amount about Iraq from her."

Their book was no cry for military action. The conclusion took a cynical

view of the first President Bush's deployment of 100,000 U.S. troops to the region: "American forces had been sent to Saudi Arabia to protect the nation's access to oil. . . . [T]he confrontation in the Gulf was prompted partly by greed—Saddam Hussein's and America's." Saddam's invasion, they wrote, was inexcusable, but Washington's failed policies were also responsible for this crisis. Mylroie and Miller cautioned against imperial overreach. The book became a number one bestseller.

But as the book was about to come out, Mylroie's past as secret freelance diplomat was exposed by an unlikely source: Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. On October 4, 1990, Mubarak delivered a speech in which he claimed that Iraq and Israel had engaged in secret contacts in 1987 and 1989 through a Harvard University professor. Mubarak said this professor had carried a message from Saddam to Israel in 1987—that Iraq had no desire to go to war with Israel—and that in 1989 this professor had visited Israel to tell officials there that Saddam cared less about the Palestinian issue than his troubles with Iran and Syria. Mubarak was probably trying to embarrass Saddam. He did not name the professor, but Israeli newspapers did: Laurie Mylroie.

Mylroie refused to comment on Mubarak's speech. More recently, she said that she had "never conveyed any messages" between Saddam and Israel. But in interviews for this book, five of her former associates in Israel and the United States confirmed that she had been a secret go-between between Baghdad and Jerusalem. In 1990 Judy Miller cryptically said to *The Boston Globe* that Mubarak had been "right on the substance" but that her coauthor had never served as an intermediary between Iraq and Israel. Yet in 2006, Miller acknowledged that "Laurie told me about the alleged 'go-between' role after a report surfaced in the press. She said it was never a formal arrangement, just an informal kind of thing."

After the Saddam book was published, Mylroie was hired as a policy analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy by Martin Indyk, a Mideast expert influential in Democratic circles. And when Indyk became an adviser to presidential candidate Bill Clinton, he asked Mylroie on one occasion to join a group of foreign policy specialists briefing Clinton on Middle East issues. Her fifteen minutes or so with the Democratic candidate, according to Indyk, were unremarkable, but long enough that Mylroie soon began advertising herself as an "adviser" to the Clinton campaign on Mideast policy.

After the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, which killed six people and injured more than 1,000, Mylroie's work took a more dramatic turn. She began poring over the evidence and theorized that the bombing had been an act of retaliation by Saddam for the Persian Gulf War. The notion was not utterly out of the question. There were a few intriguing threads. One of the minor figures in the plot, Abdul Rahman Yasin, had fled to Iraq after the attacks. And Yasin's precise status in Iraq was not clear. Born in Indiana of Iraqi parents, Yasin had grown up in Baghdad. After the bombing, Iraqi officials appeared to view Yasin as a potential bargaining chip, even offering at several points to hand him over to Washington in exchange for a shift in U.S. policy. Later on, evidence would emerge confirming what U.S. officials had suspected: that Yasin had been essentially placed under house arrest and was being watched closely by Iraqi security forces.* But in Mylroie's view, Yasin had been granted safe haven by the Iraqis, and that could only mean that Yasin had been an Iraqi agent.

Mylroie also zeroed in on phone records involving the bombing suspects. One of the men, Mohammed Salameh, was the nephew of a Palestinian terrorist, Abu Bakr, who was living in Baghdad. Salameh, Mylroie discovered, had called his uncle forty-six times in June and July 1992—before his phone was cut off for nonpayment. Mylroie had no idea what was being said in these calls, whether they had anything to do with the World Trade Center plot seven months later or involved any connection to the Iraqi government. But it didn't matter. "She would stare at you, and insist that unless you had studied all these phone records you couldn't understand what was going on," said Steven Emerson, a terrorism researcher who saw the World Trade Center bombing not as an Iraqi plot but as the act of Islamic extremists. "She would start rattling them off. At 4:07 A.M., this person called that person, then five minutes later they called someone else. How can you challenge something like that?"

Over time, Mylroie developed a Byzantine hypothesis about the 1993 bombing, one that seemed more the product of a Hollywood screenwriter

*Dobie McArthur, a Pentagon official dispatched by Wolfowitz after the war to examine voluminous Iraqi security records, reviewed the Iraqi security file on Yasin. He found no evidence that Yasin or anybody else associated with the 1993 World Trade Center attack had received any support from Baghdad for the 1993 bombing. McArthur did see records suggesting that Yasin, after fleeing to Baghdad, had been given a monthly stipend but was restricted in his movements and kept under constant surveillance.

than an Ivy League-trained scholar. She fixated on the mastermind of this first WTC attack, Ramzi Yousef. The FBI apprehended Yousef in Pakistan in 1995 and concluded that his name was but one of many aliases; that he was actually Abdul Basit Karim, a Pakistani national from the Baluch region who had been raised in Kuwait and who later studied engineering at the Swansea Institute in Wales. But Mylroie came to believe that there were, in a way, two Ramzi Yousefs. One was the real Basit, who under Mylroie's theory had been killed or had otherwise vanished along with the rest of his family during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The other was Yousef, a cold-blooded Iraqi intelligence agent who had been trained by Saddam to kill Americans and who had absconded with Basit's identity.

To back up her theory, Mylroie pointed to missing pages from Yousef's passport and several small discrepancies. For example, witnesses recalled that the Basit they had known in Wales was a few inches shorter than the six-foot-tall man arrested by the FBI. She also maintained that the Iraqi intelligence services had forged the Iraqi passport that Yousef had used to enter the United States.

FBI investigators and federal prosecutors studied her ideas and rejected them. There were several fundamental problems that essentially stopped her conspiracy theory in its tracks. After Yousef was captured, bureau agents had located witnesses from the United Kingdom who testified at the terrorist's bail hearing that the man in custody was indeed the same person they had known in Wales as Abdul Basit. And there was testimony from eyewitnesses identifying Yousef as an Islamic radical who had spent time in Afghan training camps affiliated with al-Qaeda. (Yousef himself admitted to federal agents that he had been trained in explosives and bomb making in Afghanistan.) More important, the bureau checked Yousef's fingerprints with those for Basit in Kuwait and discovered they were one and the same. Thereafter, the FBI and federal prosecutors were pretty much convinced that Mylroie's double-man idea was dead wrong.

"I don't think there was any serious question of Yousef's identity," said Dieter Snell, a top investigator for the September 11 commission who, as a federal prosecutor, tried the terrorist in the summer of 1996 in a separate case that involved a plot to blow up eleven airliners heading toward the United States. (A law enforcement official recalled that Mylroie showed up at that trial and eyed the defendant up and down intensely when he walked into the courtroom, as though she were trying to measure him.)

Still, Mylroie relentlessly promoted her double-man thesis to past and present government officials, foreign policy experts, and journalists. The FBI's debunking of Mylroie's narrative was not a matter of public record, and several neoconservatives accepted Mylroie's work as compelling evidence of Saddam's sponsorship of anti-American terrorism.

Indyk, now overseeing Iraq policy for Clinton's National Security Council, had asked the FBI and CIA to review Mylroie's theory. He wanted to believe it, Indyk later said. The Clinton administration had entered office inclined to adopt an aggressive approach toward Iraq—and this would have helped. But the CIA and FBI reported back that they had conducted an extensive analysis, Indyk said, and that "there was nothing to it." As one CIA analyst later put it, "Not only was it not true, we proved the opposite"—that Saddam had had nothing to do with the 1993 WTC bombing.

Not long after that, Indyk received a visitor at his White House office. It was Paul Wolfowitz, who at the time was dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Wolfowitz had one item on his agenda: Laurie Mylroie's theory about the World Trade Center. Wolfowitz asked why the Clinton administration was not paying adequate attention to her thesis. Indyk explained that, as far as he was concerned, it had been debunked by the CIA and FBI. Wolfowitz, according to Indyk, was "surprised" to hear this and not persuaded: "He was convinced that we were purposely refusing to see the link for policy reasons." Indyk considered it odd that Wolfowitz appeared so attached to Mylroie's ideas. He surmised that Wolfowitz felt personally guilty for the first Bush administration's failure to get rid of Saddam after the Persian Gulf War. Mylroie's theories could offer a justification for action that would rectify that past policy mistake. (Mylroie was also personally close to Wolfowitz's then-wife, Clare.) Whatever the reason, Wolfowitz was putting more faith in Mylroie than the CIA or the FBI.*

Over time, Mylroie became more persistent and more obsessive. She

*Wolfowitz and Mylroie had an old-school connection through the Telluride House—an elite, intellectually oriented residence at Cornell University, once known as a haven for followers of the prominent conservative philosopher Allan Bloom. As a Cornell student in the early 1970s, Mylroie lived in the Telluride House. Wolfowitz had resided there earlier and was a board member of the Telluride Association. As James Mann, author of *Rise of the Vulcans*, noted, Wolfowitz hired members of the Telluride community when he went into government. Mylroie was a part of this informal network, according to writer Francis Fukuyama, another Telluride alumnus.

was so convinced that the 1993 World Trade Center bombing had been an Iraqi operation that she offered herself as defense witness for Eyad Ismoil, one of the alleged terrorists in the 1995 trial of the blind sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman, who was accused of conspiring to encourage acts of terrorism in the United States, including the WTC bombings. Mylroie's position was that the defendants were patsies being held responsible for a monstrous crime committed by Saddam. Mylroie never took the stand. But she showed up at court hearings and at times appeared emotionally invested in the proceedings, according to Joan Ullman, a New York journalist who monitored the trial for Steven Emerson's terrorist-tracking outfit. At one court hearing for Ismoil, who was accused of having driven the bomb-laden truck to the World Trade Center, Mylroie was spotted "cradling Ismoil's father and at times, wiping tears from her own brimming heavily blue-eye-lined mascara," Ullman wrote in a memo at the time.

After the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, Mylroie became convinced that that attack, too, was an Iraqi strike on America. She offered her services to the lawyers for Timothy McVeigh, the antigovernment zealot accused of setting off the bomb. Mylroie sent memos promoting the Iraq connection to the McVeigh defense team. Stephen Jones, McVeigh's chief lawyer, hired her as a consultant and even sent investigators to the Philippines. It was Mylroie's suspicion that McVeigh's coconspirator, Terry Nichols, might have met in the Philippines with Yousef, the theoretical Iraqi agent. But the trail went cold. "I couldn't make it go anywhere," recalled Jones. As he saw it, Mylroie was a piece of work: an impressive tireless researcher who worked at a "fanatic" pace, calling him at all hours with new ideas and potential Iraqi links to the plot. "She was sort of like *The Da Vinci Code* people," said Jones. "She had this one grand theory. I didn't see it."

In time, Mylroie saw the hidden hand of Saddam in almost every act of anti-American terrorism in the world, even the 1998 bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa, Osama bin Laden's first major assault against the United States. As for the 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole* off the coast of Yemen, an al-Qaeda operation that killed seventeen Navy sailors—that, too, was, for Mylroie, the handiwork of the Iraqi dictator. "Everything, everything, everything was connected to Saddam," said her former collaborator Daniel Pipes. "She became monomaniacal on the subject." She also became hostile toward old friends and colleagues who didn't see the world her way. When Pipes publicly endorsed the predominant view that anti-U.S. terror-

ism was caused primarily by radical Islamic fundamentalists and questioned her Saddam-centric view of world terrorism, Mylroie accused Pipes of endangering the welfare of the republic. "My charge against you is that you are, at the periphery, responsible for the death of Americans," she e-mailed Pipes on March 7, 1999. "And furthermore, that more Americans will die, if people continue to listen to your version of events."

MYLROIE might have remained an oddball and offbeat academic insistently pushing a widely disregarded theory, but she had powerful friends, including Ahmad Chalabi and his compatriots within the Iraqi National Congress, who were certainly predisposed to depict Saddam as the world's greatest menace. In the late 1990s, Mylroie joined Chalabi's informal Washington kitchen cabinet. She advocated the INC's cause at conferences and in academic journals and the op-ed pages of *The Wall Street Journal* and other publications. She was frequently seen at the home of Francis Brooke, Chalabi's chief Washington lobbyist. Another new set of friends could be found at the offices of the American Enterprise Institute, where Mylroie landed a berth as an adjunct fellow. In the fall of 2000, the AEI published Mylroie's book about the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, called *Study of Revenge: Saddam Hussein's Unfinished War Against America*.

What was on the back of the book cover was as important as the text inside: a blurb from Paul Wolfowitz. It read:

Laurie Mylroie's provocative and disturbing book argues powerfully that the shadowy mastermind of the 1993 bombing of New York's World Trade Center, Ramzi Yousef, was in fact an agent of Iraqi intelligence. If so, what would that tell us about the extent of Saddam Hussein's ambitions? How would it change our view of Iraq's continuing efforts to retain weapons of mass destruction and to acquire new ones? How would it affect our judgments . . . and the need for a fundamentally new policy? These are questions that urgently need to be answered.

Wolfowitz, who had helped Mylroie with the manuscript, was carefully attaching his seal of approval to her thesis.

Perle, too, provided an endorsement of the work. (Woolsey wrote a supportive foreword for a later version.) In the acknowledgments, Mylroie

saluted Wolfowitz and noted that his wife, Clare, had “fundamentally shaped this book.” She thanked John Hannah, who later would become a foreign policy aide to Vice President Cheney, for his guidance. She noted that the INC’s Francis Brooke and his wife, Sharon, had offered her much support and “keen insights.” She also expressed her gratitude to David Wurmser, Michael Ledeen, and John Bolton, a fierce hawk who would soon become the State Department’s top arms control official. Scooter Libby, she noted, had supplied her with “timely and generous assistance.”

When the Bush team took office soon after the book was published, Mylroie found herself with fans in high places. She was named to a Pentagon advisory board on terrorism and technology. And her most prominent champion, Wolfowitz, used his newfound power to seek confirmation of Mylroie’s thesis. Sometime before September 11, according to DIA director Thomas Wilson, Wolfowitz pressed the DIA chief on whether he had read Mylroie’s *Study of Revenge*. Wilson replied that he hadn’t. Wolfowitz requested that Wilson have his analysts examine the book. Wilson dutifully passed along the request, and an answer came back: the DIA couldn’t find anything to back up Mylroie.

In June 2001, Wolfowitz also tried to get the CIA to reinvestigate the Mylroie theory, according to the report of the 9/11 Commission. Nothing came of that, either. Wolfowitz had by then mastered the minutiae of Mylroie’s research—and retained it. “Wolfowitz was an encyclopedia on this stuff,” Undersecretary of Defense Doug Feith subsequently said. And years later, according to Dobie McArthur, a Wolfowitz aide, the deputy defense secretary became excited when fresh intelligence surfaced about the whereabouts of an obscure associate of Yasin, the indicted 1993 bomber. Wolfowitz got up from his chair, pulled out a copy of Mylroie’s book, and opened it to the exact page where the associate was mentioned.

Within administration meetings in the early days of the Bush administration, Wolfowitz voiced a Mylroie-like view on terrorism. When the National Security Council of the new Bush administration held its first deputies meeting on terrorism in April 2001, Richard Clarke, then the White House counterterrorism adviser, talked about the urgent need to go after bin Laden and the al-Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan, according to Clarke’s memoirs. Wolfowitz was dismissive. “Well, I just don’t understand why we are beginning by talking about this one man, bin Laden,” he replied. Wolfowitz tried to switch the subject to “Iraqi terrorism.” An exas-

perated Clarke replied that the intelligence community had no evidence of any recent Iraqi terrorism against the United States—a position endorsed at the meeting by CIA Deputy Director John McLaughlin. Clarke started citing bin Laden's writings and his plans to overthrow Arab governments and set up a radical multinational caliphate, adding "sometimes, as with Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, you have to believe that these people will actually do what they say they will do." Wolfowitz snapped back, saying that he resented any comparison between the Holocaust "and this little terrorist in Afghanistan."

For years, neoconservatives, not just Myroie, had been fixating on Iraq and the need to topple its tyrannical dictator. Their approach was more geo-strategic than Myroie's, but they ended up in the same place. In 1996, Perle, Wurmser, and Feith were part of a study group that produced a paper for the Jerusalem-based Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies, a conservative, pro-Israel think tank closely allied with the policies of Israel's hawkish Likud Party. They noted that "removing Saddam Hussein from power" was "an important Israeli strategic objective" and that toppling his regime would be "a means of foiling Syria's regional ambition."

The paper, entitled "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm," was policy advice for the new hard-line Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. It had numerous other elements, the most important of which was a decisive rejection of the idea that Israel should swap "land for peace" to reach an accommodation with the Palestinians. But as part of a larger plan to secure Israel's security, the paper urged the removal of Saddam and the restoration of a Hashemite kingdom in Baghdad to box in the Syrian regime of Hafez Assad.

This report later led to another conspiracy theory: that eliminating Saddam was part of a neoconservative/Likud plot to benefit Israel. Yet the authors of "A Clean Break" had actually gone beyond the position of the Likud Party's own strategists. By the late 1990s, Israeli officials tended to consider Iran a much more significant worry than Iraq. Indyk, who was U.S. ambassador to Israel in the mid-1990s and then again in 2000 and 2001, recalled that Iraq was barely mentioned as an Israeli priority during his years in Tel Aviv. "It was Iran, Iran, Iran all the time," Indyk said. "The Israelis were not that bothered by Saddam." Though "A Clean Break" was not evidence that the neoconservative fixation on Saddam was made (or

coordinated) in Israel, it did show that Perle and his allies saw Saddam as a chessboard piece that should be removed to further a larger strategic game plan. This scrappy band of policy fighters seemed to believe that toppling inconvenient regimes could be achieved with relatively small costs—and that such bold steps could reshape the geopolitical map of the Middle East for the better.

In late 1997, *The Weekly Standard*, a magazine financed by media baron Rupert Murdoch and edited by William Kristol, former chief of staff for Vice President Dan Quayle, ran an issue with a cover proclaiming, "Saddam Must Go." An editorial declared that the UN WMD inspections, under way since the end of the Persian Gulf War, had been ineffectual and that a containment policy would not work. In the same issue, Wolfowitz and Zalmay Khalilzad, then a strategist at the Rand Corporation, published an article that maintained that "only the substantial use of military force" with the goal of "the liberation of Iraq" would do the trick.

Kristol, Perle, and their allies were not plotting a conspiracy. They were advocating war in full public view. A month later, the Project for the New American Century, a foreign policy shop headed by Kristol, sent President Clinton a letter urging him to attack Iraq. If Saddam acquired WMDs, they wrote, "the safety of American troops in the region, of our friends and allies like Israel and the moderate Arab states, and a significant portion of the world's supply of oil will all be put at hazard." The letter said nothing about bringing democracy to Iraq or the regime or what would happen after an invasion. The eighteen signatories on the letter included several conservatives who would wind up with positions in the George W. Bush administration, including Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Perle, Bolton, Khalilzad, former Pentagon official Richard Armitage, and Iran-*contra* veteran Elliott Abrams.*

After Congress passed and Clinton signed into law in the fall of 1998 the Iraq Liberation Act, the advocates of regime change were hardly satisfied—especially when it became clear that neither the Clinton administration nor Congress had any real plan for achieving the goal set out in the law. Nor were they mollified when Clinton, in December 1998, launched bomb-

*By this point, the PNAC, which Kristol had created the previous June, had become the leading advocate for war in Iraq. In its founding statement, the group had called for expansion of the U.S. military so Washington could preserve and extend "an international order friendly to our security." That statement had been signed by twenty-five heavyweight political figures, including Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and Libby.

ing strikes on military sites in Iraq, declaring that a Saddam regime in control of WMDs was a risk that could not be tolerated. (Explaining these air strikes, Clinton said, "Our mission is clear: to degrade Saddam's capacity to develop and deliver weapons of mass destruction.") Unless Clinton got fully behind the "Iraqi opposition" (meaning the Iraqi National Congress) and considered sending in U.S. troops, Robert Kagan of the Project for a New American Century wrote in *The Weekly Standard*, his policy would remain useless.

In September 2000, with a neck-and-neck presidential race under way, the PNAC produced a strategy paper that noted that the "United States has for decades sought to play a more permanent role in Gulf regional security. While the unresolved conflict with Iraq provides the immediate justification, the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein." Taking out Saddam was about more than taking out Saddam. It was part of the larger strategic vision: expanding the United States' influence and showing its muscle in the Middle East. When the George W. Bush administration took office in January 2001, it was clear to Bush's Treasury secretary, Paul O'Neill (as he would recount later), that one top-of-the-agenda item was getting rid of Saddam: "It was all about finding *a way to do it*. That was the tone of it. The president saying, 'Fine. Go find me a way to do this.'"

IN THE shell-shocked days following 9/11, much of the world was looking for an explanation. At the AEI event, Mylroie had one ready. She claimed that al-Qaeda did not have the "sophistication" and "organization" to pull off 9/11 and that the group was nothing but a Keystones Kops-like band of terrorists. "There's evidence," she asserted, "to suggest that Iraq was involved with bin Laden in the 1998 bombing [of two U.S. embassies in Africa] because those bombings occurred in a certain context." For Mylroie, context *was* evidence. Mylroie concluded with the recommendation that all U.S. intelligence on terrorism be scrubbed and reexamined. Such a review, she maintained, would show that al-Qaeda was not a stand-alone outfit. Instead, Mylroie said, "a review will conclude that a good bit of the terrorism we have experienced since the Gulf War is merely another phase of the Gulf War—Saddam's part of the Gulf War." After she finished, Wurmser remarked, "I want to reemphasize everything Laurie just said. . . . We really do have to

begin with Iraq." Ledeen then called on the administration to "unleash" Chalabi's INC. The debris from the World Trade Center had barely settled and cooled, and Mylroie and her allies were already pushing a war to overthrow Saddam.

THE Mylroie-bolstered belief that Saddam was America's number one enemy also gripped the most senior officials of the Bush administration. Within hours of the al-Qaeda strike, Rumsfeld was asking if Saddam could be targeted as well as Osama bin Laden. The next day, Bush, according to Richard Clarke, pulled him aside in the White House Situation Room and asked him to look for evidence that Saddam had staged 9/11. When Clarke replied, "Mr. President, al-Qaeda did this," Bush said, "I know, I know, but . . . see if Saddam was involved. Just look." Another counterterrorism official who witnessed the exchange said that Bush was "very forceful" in his direction to Clarke. After Bush left the room, this official stared straight ahead with mouth wide open and had one thought: "This is Wolfowitz." Days later, Clarke sent Rice a detailed memo that concluded there was no "compelling case" that Iraq had planned the 9/11 attacks. It also said there was no confirmed reporting that bin Laden and Saddam had cooperated on WMDs.

During the weeks following 9/11, Wolfowitz acted as if the terror attacks were proof of the theory he and Mylroie had advanced for years. After all, if Saddam had been behind the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center, it made perfect sense he would have tried again in 2001. At a Camp David meeting of the Cabinet on September 15, Wolfowitz argued that there was a 10 to 50 percent chance Saddam had been part of the 9/11 plot, and he suggested Bush consider attacking Iraq right away, noting a war in Iraq might be easier than one in Afghanistan. On September 17, he sent Rumsfeld a memo, entitled "Preventing More Events," that maintained that the odds were far better than one in ten that Saddam had been part of the 9/11 conspiracy; he cited the same thesis that Mylroie had developed that Iraq had been behind the 1993 WTC bombing. The next day, he fired off a similar memo to his boss. This one bore the ominous title "Were We Asleep?"—a suggestion that thousands of Americans were dead because the U.S. government had not perceived the real terrorist threat clearly. Then he dispatched Woolsey to London to find evidence that would back up Mylroie.

Officials at the Justice Department and CIA dismissed the trip as a wild-goose chase. "These guys don't give up," one senior Justice Department official said about Wolfowitz and his fellow Mylroie advocates. Justice Department promptly assigned a veteran prosecutor to accompany Woolsey on the mission. In London, Woolsey pushed British authorities to turn over more of Abdul Basit's records, which he believed would show that the former student from Pakistan was not Ramzi Yousef. The Brits patiently explained that they had cooperated with the FBI for years on this matter and that the fingerprint evidence was conclusive: Basit's fingerprints matched those of Yousef's. Woolsey remained unsatisfied. "He was being a real pain in the ass," recalled Peter Drumheller, the CIA's European Division chief, who at the time received complaints from the CIA's London station about Woolsey's trip.

Another big booster of the Saddam-as-master-terrorist theory was Bush's new counterterrorism adviser, Wayne Downing, a retired general who once had designed an INC-backed plan for the overthrow of Saddam. In October 2001, Downing, Wolfowitz, and other proponents of a war with Iraq thought they had yet more ammunition for the case against Saddam. A series of deadly anthrax-laced letters had been sent to the Capitol Hill offices of Senator Daschle and Senator Patrick Leahy and to several newsrooms. Mylroie asserted that Saddam was behind the mailings. An early forensic test of the anthrax letters (which was later disputed) appeared to show that the anthrax spores were highly refined and "weaponized." To the Iraq hawks, the news was electric. "This is definitely Saddam!" Downing shouted to several White House aides. One of these aides later recalled overhearing Downing excitedly sharing the news over the phone with Wolfowitz and Feith. "I had the feeling they were high-five-ing each other," the White House official said.

The Iraq connection to the anthrax attacks never went anywhere. And Bush did not immediately embrace the advice of Mylroie, Wolfowitz, Perle, and their allies. His first concern was Afghanistan, and on October 7, 2001, he launched military operations against the Taliban regime. But as the Bush administration prosecuted its military campaign in Afghanistan, the prospect of striking Saddam remained a top-drawer item of consideration. On November 21—nine days after the fall of Kabul had sent thousands of Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters and supporters fleeing south—Bush took aside Rumsfeld, according to Bob Woodward's *Plan of Attack*, and asked him to draw up a fresh war plan for Iraq and to keep it a secret.

THE hawks who had accepted Mylroie's ideas about Saddam and terrorism were moving closer to their objective. In his first State of the Union speech, Bush decried the Axis of Evil, which in the speechwriting process had begun as a rhetorical attack only on Iraq. And over the next few months, there was a steady stream of preparation for war within the Bush administration but only the occasional leak indicating that a decision had been reached. On February 13, 2002, Knight Ridder reported that "President Bush has decided to oust Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein from power and ordered the CIA, the Pentagon and other agencies to devise a combination of military, diplomatic and covert steps to achieve that goal." (The news service had caught a hint of Anabasis.) At a press conference in March, Bush declared that Saddam was "a dangerous man who possesses the world's most dangerous weapons." All the while, Wolfowitz was championing Mylroie's thesis. At a March 17 lunch with England's ambassador to the United States, Christopher Meyer, Wolfowitz tried to convince the British that Iraq was tied to the first World Trade Center attack. And in a June 1 speech delivered at West Point, Bush laid out a grand national security vision and said that he would take "preemptive action" to defend the nation and to "confront the worst threats before they emerge." Strategies of containment or deterrence would no longer be considered sufficient. Iraq seemed to be the case he had in mind.

ON JULY 23, 2002, Tony Blair held a meeting with senior members of his government to discuss Iraq. Richard Dearlove, the head of British intelligence, briefed the group on his recent talks in Washington, where he had met with CIA Director George Tenet. The minutes of the meeting recorded his report:

Military action was now seen as inevitable. Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy. The NSC had no patience with the UN route, and no enthusiasm for publishing material on the Iraqi regime's record.

There was little discussion in Washington of the aftermath after military action.

The memo did not spell out what Dearlove meant when he said the intelligence was "being fixed." But at this meeting Foreign Secretary Jack Straw raised questions about the WMD rationale for war. According to the minutes, Straw noted:

It seemed clear that Bush had made up his mind to take military action, even if the timing was not yet decided. But the case was thin. Saddam was not threatening his neighbours, and his WMD capability was less than that of Libya, North Korea or Iran.

And at the meeting, Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon reported that the U.S. military had prepared several operations for the coming war.* The war, Hoon guessed, would start in January 2003.

By now, Laurie Mylroie had become a talking head on Iraq, hitting the cable news shows, writing op-eds, talking up her book, and urging war against Saddam. Appearing on CNN on July 31, 2002, she told anchor Aaron Brown that Bush had already decided to get rid of Saddam. She asserted that Bush had ordered the CIA to "do it by covert means" but that no one, including the CIA director, "expected a secret attempt to overthrow Saddam to succeed. Thus, war was the only option. Fortunately, she noted, there already was a group ready and capable to lead Iraq to democracy following a military invasion: Ahmad Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress. Asked why Bush was committed to removing Saddam, Mylroie said it was "partly" due to Saddam's weapons and "partly it's [Saddam's] prior support for terrorism, including strong suspicions about Iraq's involvement in 9/11 in the part of the vice president's office and the office of the secretary of defense." But, Brown interjected, wasn't it the general view within the

*Two days earlier, a British Cabinet Office briefing paper had stated, "A post-war occupation of Iraq could lead to a protracted and costly nation-building exercise. As already made clear, the U.S. military plans are virtually silent on this point."

U.S. intelligence community that Saddam had not been mixed up in 9/11? The CIA's refusal to see the connection, Mylroie replied, was an "enormous scandal," bigger than Enron. The CIA, she added, was engaged in an "enormous cover-up exercise" by not, in essence, accepting her theory that Saddam was behind 9/11. "No reasonable person," she said, ". . . would conclude otherwise."