

Saddam Hussein, A Virulent Threat

Interviewer

So today is January 18. We're at the office of the Hudson Institute continuing our interview with Douglas Feith. Doug, tell me this session I'd like to focus on Iraq. The story, the conversations about Iraq that led up to the invasion of 2003.

Interviewer

But when you arrived in the administration in 2001, what role did Iraq have in the discussions?

Douglas Feith

I came into my job in mid July of 2001 and I was aware that there had been a number of meetings, interagency meetings, about Iraq from pretty much the first days of the administration. Because Iraq was clearly a major item on the U.S. national security agenda throughout the 1990s. And so it was a problem that got handed forward from the first Bush administration and the Clinton administration to the George W. Bush administration.

Douglas Feith

The main strategy that the United States had adopted for dealing with Iraq throughout the 90s was a containment strategy based on a series of U.N. Security Council resolutions.

Interviewer

Let's just pause to describe the word containment, which is a Cold War reference really. What that means for those who are new to this term.

Douglas Feith

Well, what it meant was dealing with a regime that the U.N. Security Council members had decided was a very dangerous regime. The Saddam Hussein regime. Dealing with it after the 1990-91 war, Gulf war, and trying to contain the threats that that regime continued to pose to the region, short of having to overthrow the Saddam Hussein government.

Douglas Feith

I mean what happened was Saddam Hussein had come to power in the late 70s. He had launched some bloody purges within Iraq and then very soon launched the war against Iran that lasted for about eight years in which about a million people died. And when that war came to a stalemate at the end of the '80s, it was only two years later that Saddam launched another war by invading Kuwait.

Douglas Feith

And so the world in general looked at Saddam and said this is an extremely dangerous guy. He's launched two wars in essentially ten years with enormous casualties. And there was a large international Coalition led by the United States that threw the Iraqi forces out of Kuwait, but the decision was made after Iraq was expelled from Kuwait that the Coalition forces would not march to Baghdad and overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime.

Douglas Feith

So Saddam was left in place. Much of his military apparatus survived the war in 1991, so he remained able to threaten countries in the region. And the question was, given that there was not the will, there was not the stomach, to launch the kind of war that would have been necessary to overthrow Saddam, and that he remained in power and he remained capable and powerful, what could the world do to contain the threats that he represented?

Douglas Feith

And so what happened was the Security Council came up with a series of measures. They included things like weapons inspections, economic sanctions, there were various diplomatic demands made of Iraq. And then eventually you had the establishment of the [Iraqi] No Fly Zones in the north to protect the Kurds and the south to protect the Iraqi Shiites. And then when Saddam threatened Kuwait again a few years after Desert Storm, the southern No Fly Zone became what was called a No Drive Zone also. And so there were these various measures. And they were all designed to try to contain the threats that Saddam could continue to pose to the region.

Interviewer

Did they work?

Douglas Feith

Well, the history of the 1990s was a history of Saddam resisting, fighting, trying to undermine the various elements of this containment strategy. And so for example, he fought very hard against the comprehensive economic sanctions. And when I say comprehensive, the initial economic sanctions prohibited Iraq from selling oil and it prohibited Iraq from buying things other than food and medicine. But it didn't have because it couldn't sell oil, it didn't have the revenues to buy very much and Saddam immediately launched an international campaign using the connections that he had had with certain friendly countries to say that the economic sanctions were imposing unbearable, inhumane burdens on the Iraqi people.

Douglas Feith

So the economic sanctions got revised in the mid 1990s and replaced with the program known as Oil for Food where Iraq was allowed to sell oil, but the revenues from those oil sales would go into a trust fund controlled by the U. N. organization and that trust fund would be used to make purchases of allowable items which meant basically everything other than things that were considered to be highly militarily significant.

Interviewer

That program in the late 90s was it, proved to have been fraudulent, right?

Douglas Feith

Well, see what happened was that first Saddam undermined the comprehensive economic sanctions by getting them replaced with the much more, much looser Oil for Food program. And then he worked very hard and successfully at corrupting the Oil for Food program so that he, through various kickback arrangements, was able to get his hands on billions of dollars of revenue that was not in fact controlled by this U.N. trust fund and he could then use these billions of dollars to buy anything he wanted, including militarily significant items.

Douglas Feith

Now, the economic sanctions, even though they were weakened by him and he corrupted the Oil for Food program, they were not without effect. So they had some effect, but much less than they were intended to have. When it came to the weapons inspections, he was in a cat and mouse game with the weapons inspectors pretty much from the beginning. And fought the weapons inspections, and tried to limit the ability of the weapons inspectors to operate, and he gave them false information, and he harassed them, and he threatened them. And ultimately by 1998 he got to the point where he announced that he was no longer going to cooperate with the weapons inspectors and he effectively threw them out of the country. I mean they what happened was he announced he wasn't going to let them operate so they left the country and you know that was the end of the weapons inspections.

Interviewer

So this is the characterization of the 1990s.

Douglas Feith

Right. And another important element, as I mentioned, there were these No Fly Zones in the north and south and by the late 1990s Iraqi forces were shooting at the American and British aircraft that were flying daily to enforce the No Fly Zones were shooting anti-aircraft fire and missiles at these aircraft, pretty much on a daily basis. And so every major element of the containment strategy was being attacked, undermined, corrupted, challenged by Saddam throughout the '90s. And he had dismantled major planks of this containment strategy by the time the George W. Bush administration came in.

Douglas Feith

Now, in 1998 when Saddam announced that he was not going to cooperate anymore with the weapons inspectors and effectively expelled them from the country, President Clinton responded with three days of bombing that were known as Operation Desert Fox. And so this was considered a serious challenge by the Clinton administration. This wasn't something that only a handful of conservatives were worried about. This was a serious national security problem from the point of view of the Clinton administration.

Interviewer

But Desert Fox is ineffective, right?

Douglas Feith

Well it didn't stop it was ineffective in that it did not stop the daily shooting by Iraqi forces at the American and British aircraft. And this was a problem for the [George W.] Bush administration. When George W. Bush became President, the question of what do we do about Iraq? What's our basic policy? Are we going to continue to rely on containment and if we are what can be done to shore up the containment measures? And if we're not going to continue to rely on containment, what are we going to rely on instead? Those were questions that were pretty high up on the national security agenda right from the beginning.

Interviewer

Draw the battle lines of this. Who was on which side? Who had what idea here? And really, what was the sort of cross fertilization that could emerge as a new policy? This is all before 9/11 but this the topic at hand because what to do about Iraq is on the plate of the new

administration.

Douglas Feith

Right. This was a major issue, not just for the United States but for the U.N. And I don't believe there was any other topic that got the kind of attention from the U.N. Security Council that Iraq did in the 1990s. There was something like 16, I believe, Security Council resolutions that were adopted on Iraq from the end of Desert Storm until the beginning of the [George W.] Bush administration.

Douglas Feith

And the initial position of the State Department leadership was we should try to shore up the economic element of the containment strategy. So Colin Powell came forward early on in 2001 with an initiative for what he called "smart sanctions." And this was, in the same way that Oil for Food was a reworking of the sanctions arrangement that actually weakened or made less tough the sanctions that had been in place, "smart sanctions" was yet another retreat that aimed to increase support for a less rigorous economic sanctions scheme.

Interviewer

How did it work? How did "smart sanctions" work?

Douglas Feith

Basically it was supposed to be tougher sanctions on fewer items. And so what you're doing is you're basically removing sanctions on a large class of items so that the Iraqis have the right to buy more things than they had the right to buy before, but then you're saying that you're going to be even tougher in enforcing the sanctions on the items that remain on the list. Basically what the "smart sanctions" reflected was the diminution over time in international political support for economic sanctions on Iraq. And so as a way of trying to slow down this decrease in support, you focus your attention on controlling fewer and fewer items. And that's basically what Colin Powell proposed and got support for at the U.N.

Douglas Feith

So that was another victory for Saddam. Now you could say a bigger victory would have been destroying these economic sanctions altogether, but this was an attempt to exercise some kind of control over the retreat that we were making in the economic sanctions area.

From Containment to Regime Change

Interviewer

What was your attitude at the time? Both before you joined the administration and then immediately after you did.

Douglas Feith

Well, I was focused on the difficulties that we had in the sanctions area. In 1998 when Saddam effectively expelled the weapons inspectors, there was a lot of attention in Washington national security policy circles on the failures and the weaknesses of the containment strategy.

Douglas Feith

And that's when you had these two public letters written that were signed by overlapping groups of people. Mainly conservatives, not entirely, they were a mix of people who were concerned about the threats coming from the Saddam Hussein regime. But there were two public letters written to President Clinton—the gist of which was the sanctions are crumbling. International support for them is crumbling. Saddam is undoing them and we need to think much more seriously about what our strategy toward Iraq should be because the sanctions were supposed to fulfill a purpose. They're not fulfilling the purpose of containing Saddam, and so Saddam remains a very dangerous guy and the United States needs to come up with another approach.

Douglas Feith

And about six months after those letters came out in early 1998, the Congress, the U.S. Congress, adopted the Iraq Liberation Act which agreed with the analysis largely that was contained in those letters and said—and this was part of the language of the Iraq Liberation Act. It said the policy of the United States government should be regime change in Baghdad. And I don't remember the exact numbers, but if I recall correctly the Iraq Liberation Act passed unanimously in the United States Senate and overwhelmingly with bipartisan support in the House of Representatives. And then President Clinton signed it into law. So it's important to remember that because many critics of the Iraq War were

Douglas Feith

Had in fact signed on to that analysis and supported the Iraq Liberation Act and said that regime change was our policy, and then later claimed that the only people who were really concerned about Saddam were a small group of extreme right wingers. That's not historically accurate.

Interviewer

Of course they could have supported the resolution without intending that it would be the actual military overthrow of Saddam. They could profess desire for regime change to be achieved through sanctions and other methods of inspiring an internal uprising or whatever

Douglas Feith

That's absolutely correct, and I would say that was probably the view of almost everybody who signed on to those letters and the private citizens who signed on to the letters and the members of Congress who signed on to the Iraq Liberation Act.

Douglas Feith

Nobody was necessarily saying at the time that you need to have more as the means to bring about regime change. There were other—and that gets back to your original question which is what were people discussing in the Bush administration in the first months? And what they were discussing was the same kinds of issues that had begun to be discussed in a very intense way in 1998.

Interviewer

In the Clinton administration.

Douglas Feith

During the Clinton years. And that was the crumbling of the sanctions, the crumbling of the containment strategy, and the question about what do you do about it. And if the goal should be containment or if the goal should be regime change. And if the goal is regime change, what are the various methods that should be adopted to bring that goal about.

Douglas Feith

And there were, in the first six months or so of the Bush administration, there were a number of discussions. They were mostly at the sub-cabinet level, at the deputy's committee level and below. Discussions about different approaches that could be taken supporting the Iraqi external groups, you know the exiles and the Kurds, changing the response options for when our aircraft gets fired on.

Douglas Feith

One of the things we had a policy that when our aircraft were shot at, the aircraft would strike the anti-aircraft artillery and the radars that were used in the attack. But they wouldn't, for example, broaden the scope of the targets for retaliation to do serious damage to Iraqi military capabilities. They weren't bombing targets in Baghdad in retaliation for the attacks on our aircraft, so there was a question of I mean it became clear that the response options that our military was using were not imposing severe enough costs on Saddam to get him to actually stop shooting at our aircraft.

Interviewer

Let me actually pause here because so if the goal was containment from these policies

Douglas Feith

In the 90s.

Interviewer

The 90s, right. You could argue that while he had bristled under them and defied them, he had not invaded another country and had not started another war. Was there real concern that the weapons of mass destruction were being built? In other words, how would we not contain him with this policy?

Douglas Feith

Well, the concern was that he was looking to dismantle all the sanctions that were pinching him. And he had succeeded in completely dismantling the weapons inspections. He was working on dismantling the economic sanctions. International support for maintaining these containment measures was dwindling. And the intelligence analysis was that once Saddam scored serious victories by taking on the whole world and knocking out their containment strategy plank by plank, he could emerge at the end of this period having scored a major victory against all of his enemies, the whole U.N. Security Council. And he would be emboldened. He would be stronger. He would be more influential and intimidating within the region. And he would be able to accelerate his various aggressive policies, including his WMD policies.

Douglas Feith

The assessment, for example, on his WMD programs was that he was planning to intensify

them and break out of various constraints that he had put on his own programs once he got out from under sanctions. But one of the things was the idea that he could, in the same way that he took enormous pride—Saddam took enormous pride, in having confronted the world over Kuwait. And even though his forces got expelled from Kuwait, Saddam bragged repeatedly to his own people, to his own leadership—military and civilian—that after his forces had been expelled from Kuwait, when there was this crucial moment when the Coalition was deciding whether to march on Baghdad or not, he as the leader of Iraq used Iraqi forces to deter the Coalition forces for moving to Baghdad. And that is what Saddam referred to as the mother of all battles. And he said he won that. He confronted the entire world and he won it.

Interviewer

When, in fact, the Coalition didn't feel they had the authority to go to Baghdad. Isn't that right? What is your attitude about that?

Douglas Feith

Look, he—

Interviewer

That's a crucial moment in the later part of the twentieth century for the American story, isn't it?

Douglas Feith

Right.

Interviewer

Why didn't we go to Baghdad? What do you think?

Douglas Feith

The Bush, Sr. administration made the decision that it didn't want to go. There are various—I'm sure there were various reasons on the part of all the different principles as to why they didn't want to go. Once they decided they didn't want to go, they made the observation that they had put the Coalition together based on the idea that the Coalition was simply going to liberate Kuwait.

Douglas Feith

There's an interesting argument about how influential was that, in deciding the [George H.W.] Bush administration not to go beyond the original war aim, I mean, one suspects that if the President, if President Bush, Sr., had decided it was really strategically crucial to follow up the expulsion from Iraq with a march on Baghdad, he would have done more coalition diplomacy and tried to rework the mandate.

Interviewer

But given our—

Douglas Feith

But given that he decided he didn't want to do it, he was able to say well—and it

would have been hard to do it because we brought people into the Coalition on a different basis.

Interviewer

Given our experience in the George W. Bush administration, one would have to say that if there was not the planning there by which to march to Baghdad and overthrow Saddam, that we may have suffered from absence of planning in when we did plan, yet the administration, the Bush Sr. Administration, was not in that position to see they had not made the plans to go to Baghdad early on. To seize that opportunity would have been

The Mother of All Battles
Douglas Feith

Right. For whatever reason, the Bush Sr. administration decided that it was going to end the war when it ended the war. From Saddam's point of view, it was an open question for awhile. He took a number of actions and after he took those actions, the Coalition stood down.

Douglas Feith

So from Saddam's point of view, he defeated the Coalition. In what he called the mother of all battles. And that phrase became famous but most people forget what it referred to. What it referred to was Saddam's, as he viewed it, glorious victory over the Coalition after the expulsion from Kuwait.

Douglas Feith

Didn't he use it also before the Desert Storm? Didn't he say it will be the mother of all battles? Or was he always referring to the fact if they march on Baghdad it would be the mother of all battles?

Douglas Feith

That's an interesting question. I think that's worth looking up. That's worth I don't remember. But I believe that he coined it later, but I may be wrong. You'll have to check that out.

Douglas Feith

But he clearly where this comes out is I think we've talked about this before. There's a study known as the Iraqi Perspectives Project that is a book that was produced by a number of historians who were given access to the interrogation records of all the top Iraqi officials including Saddam, whom we captured in the war. And in that study they point out that Saddam and all the top people around him talked frequently about the mother of all battles that Saddam won. And that this was a major claim by Saddam to the genius of his leadership. He built political power on that victory.

Interviewer

Sure.

Douglas Feith

And what he was aiming to do with regard to the sanctions one assumes, is a similar thing. In other words, if he can confront the whole world through the U.N. which adopts all these

resolutions to constrain and contain and squeeze and diminish Iraq, and standing up to them, fighting them, resisting them, undermining them, over 10 years or 15 years, he gets them all to back down and fall away. I mean thatâ€™sâ€™”on the diplomatic level, on the strategic level, for Iraq also a terrific victory. I think thatâ€™s what he was aiming at and thatâ€™s what people were concerned about in 2001 because he was well on his way to achieving that. I mean even Hans Blix, in his bookâ€™”

Interviewer

Hans Blix being the inspectorâ€™”

Douglas Feith

Hans Blix being the U.N. weapons inspectorâ€™”who was opposed to the war. But even he in his book points out that in 2001 the U.N. sanctions regime was crumbling. And so when you say Saddam was not contained, he was breaking out plank by plank, piece by pieceâ€™”

Interviewer

But Saddam was contained you mean when I say Saddam was notâ€™”

Douglas Feith

Right. No, but you said that an argument that could be made is that Saddam was reasonably successfully contained. Maybe I said it wrong before. Right. That he was reasonably successfully contained. And what Iâ€™m saying is the argument could also be made, and was in fact made by many people, that he was not being effectively contained because he was breaking out piece by piece and systematically dismantling this arrangement, aiming for the kind of victory against the U.N. Security Council that he believed he had scored against the international coalition in 1991.

Interviewer

So some of the arguments in the room that day, right, those early months, were continue containmentâ€™”

Douglas Feith

Continue containment by trying to shore it up because it was clearly cracking.

Interviewer

Right, right.

Douglas Feith

And so the question is can you repair the cracks and basically maintain the policy? Or do you have to say containment is a failure and then develop a new policy?

Interviewer

And that new policy wouldâ€™”

Douglas Feith

And that new policy could be any one of a number of things, but one thing that it could be,

as suggested by the Iraq Liberation Act, was a policy of trying to bring about regime change.

Douglas Feith

And then, if the answer was we should try to work toward a regime change, then the question is what are the means that you can use. There were discussions of intelligence means. You know, covert actions—can we try to stimulate a coup? Now, that had been a policy during the Clinton years. In the mid-’90s there were several attempts made by the CIA to work with Iraqi anti-Saddam groups in Kurdistan and outside the country to try to bring about a coup against the Saddam Hussein regime. And they had failed. And in one particular case, failed on a large scale—failed on a scale that various commentators said was the biggest setback for U.S. intelligence since the Bay of Pigs. And—where thousands of people that we had been working with in Iraq, thousands of Iraqis, had to flee the country. And a number of them had to get asylum in the United States. That was in ’95-’96.

Douglas Feith

So, one question was even though there had been those terrible failures in the mid-’90s, was there some serious effort that could be made to try to stimulate a coup? That was discussed.

Douglas Feith

Another thing that was discussed was is there some way of trying to create the kind of autonomy in southern Iraq that had been created in northern Iraq after 1991? So then you would have a substantial area of southern Iraq that would be largely free from control by Iraqi forces.

Interviewer

How would you create that?

Douglas Feith

Well, how did you create it in the north? I mean you basically created a zone that got protected. And part of the thinking was if you could create a zone in the north and maybe expand it to include the oil producing areas of the north. And create a zone in the south where the other major oil is—in Iraq, the oil is in the north and the south and not in the center of the country.

Interviewer

Right.

Douglas Feith

So part of the thinking was without having to invade Iraq, if you could create—this was known as an enclave strategy—if you could create an enclave in the south, similar to the enclave in the north and maybe extend the enclave in the north to cover the oil areas, you could deprive Saddam of his oil resources and reduce him to little more than Mayor of Baghdad. And if that oppressive regime were weakened very severely in that fashion, it might be easier for the Iraqis to overthrow him.

Douglas Feith

I mean peopleâ€”basically people were trying to think creatively about ways to facilitate regime change short of war. Now, of course, when you talk about the enclave strategy, one of the objections that was raised is it could stimulate a war.

Interviewer

Right.

Douglas Feith

And so you know, that was an extremely serious objection soâ€”I mean when people were saying weâ€™d like to think of things short of war, there was clearly the danger that anything you do short of war, if itâ€™s provocative enough, could trigger a war whether you wanted it or not.

Interviewer

I imagine the enclave strategy could also vulcanize the country. Youâ€™d have the Kurds in the north, youâ€™d have more of a Shiite section in the southâ€”

Douglas Feith

Sure.

Interviewer

â€”and the Sunnis, whichâ€”

Douglas Feith

Which is another argument. No, I mean, none of these arguments was clearly terrific and they all had major drawbacks. But then again, leaving Saddam Hussein in power while the U.N. sanctionsâ€”economic, security, and otherwiseâ€”crumbled, was also a bad option. The reason that Iraq was such a problem is that there were no good options.

â€œAll Bark and No Biteâ€”

Interviewer

So when 9/11 happened, these discussions took on a new urgency.

Douglas Feith

Well, itâ€™s worth pointing out that in August of 2001, the administration had been around for eight months â€”well seven or eight months. And we had not adopted a new Iraq strategy. There had been discussions but the discussions first of all rarely got to the principalsâ€™ level. In any eventâ€”

Interviewer

That would mean theyâ€™re still at the deputyâ€™sâ€”

Douglas Feith

They were still at the deputyâ€™s level and below. They got to the principalsâ€™ level on occasion but not in a sustained fashion. As a matter of fact, it was Secretary Rumsfeld who wrote a very provocative memo, which I highlight in my book, in July 2001 saying we

should bring this issue of Iraq”and he was particularly focused on the problems of the No Fly Zones because he was concerned because Air Force people were complaining bitterly. He was concerned that some day the Iraqis are going to get a lucky shot and down a U.S. aircraft.

Interviewer

And then it would be a crisis.

Douglas Feith

And then you”ll have a crisis. And then we”re going to wind up doing one of two things. We”re either going to cut back on the No Fly Zone enforcement, which would be a big victory for Saddam. Or we”re going to intensify our reaction to the shooting, because they shot down a plane, and that could provoke a war.

Douglas Feith

And what Rumsfeld said was if we”re going to be in a situation where we”re either going to cut back on the flights or we”re going to intensify our retaliation, why do we want to wait around until they kill or capture a pilot for that to happen? If there”s an argument for cutting back, let”s just cut back”why do we have to kill a pilot, you know, first and create a crisis? If there”s an argument for cutting back, cut back. If there”s an argument for tougher retaliation, then let”s adopt tougher retaliation.

Douglas Feith

The one thing that didn”t make any sense was continuing a policy that was not yielding a large benefit, but was running a large risk where events would be driven by the happenstance of a lucky shot at an American aircraft.

Interviewer

Well, and the capital was dwindling because”capital, I mean the investment in it, because of his victories and defeating the elements of the containment strategy.

Douglas Feith

Correct. Correct. So Rumsfeld was pushing, saying we need high level consideration of what we want to do about Iraq. And, by the way, Rumsfeld in this memo that he wrote in July 2001, said we should look at this comprehensively with no preconceptions. And he even suggested that one of the options could be a diplomatic initiative to reach out to Saddam and talk to him. And this was not a position that Rumsfeld favored, but it showed that he wanted a truly comprehensive, start from square one, review of our Iraq policy.

Interviewer

But when 9/11 happens, that review is still not prepared.

Douglas Feith

No. And what happened was, in the days just before 9/11, in August 2001, interestingly enough, there were a number of stories in the newspapers saying the Bush administration is wussy on Iraq. These people came in having signed”because a number of the administration officials had signed these public letters I referred to back in 1998 saying that the sanctions policy is a failure and we should consider regime change. And then, of

course, a number of them supported the Iraq Liberation Act done later in 1998.

Douglas Feith

And so now, all of these people, or a number of these people, are top level administration officials including Rumsfeld and Armitage and various others. And so critics of the Bush administration started ridiculing in the newspapers the Bush administration for being weak and having criticized the Clinton administration's weak Iraq policy and having put nothing tougher in its place.

Interviewer

All bark and no bite.

Douglas Feith

All bark and no bite. And this was an interesting piece of political background to 9/11.

Douglas Feith

So basically there's a debate. The debate is not producing a new policy. So the idea that this administration came in hell bent on overthrowing the regime in Iraq, and you know we were going to do it and we decided that from the beginning, is not true. On the contrary, the administration came in, Iraq was on the agenda, it got discussed, but it was not given high enough priority that in the first seven or eight months any new policy was adopted except for "smart sanctions" at the U.N. which was

Interviewer

Do you think that Rumsfeld, though, already favored a violent overthrow?

Douglas Feith

No, I do not think so. Put it this way, I never saw that. I don't know anybody that actually at that point had said I think we know enough now to say that we should, you know, send in hundreds of thousands of troops into the region and overthrow Saddam.

Interviewer

Right.

Douglas Feith

That would have been a very large leap to have taken right at the beginning. I mean what people did, they came in and they said we have an extremely unsatisfactory situation here. We need to think through what can be done about it. And that was the approach that people took.

Douglas Feith

And there were some people who said it's not extremely unsatisfactory. The sanctions are crumbling but they're not crumbling immediately. We can shore them up a little bit. We can kick the can down the road. You know, it's a problem but it's a manageable problem. In other words, you didn't have people all saying it's absolutely "look, in a debate like this you get diverse views all the time so you never have a situation where everybody comes together instantly in favor of a particular course of

action.

Interviewer

Right. And the nature of containment anyway is that it is essentially kicking the can down the road. Isn't that right? I mean, the Soviet Union case we had—they were certainly spitting and chomping at the bit through all the containment period, and yet basically you could say it was a period of peace. Or the alternative may have been—

Douglas Feith

But here's something that I think is interesting as a historical comparison. Containment was in place as a strategy from the Truman Era you could argue up until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. But, there was containment and there was containment.

Douglas Feith

The Reagan administration stood for the proposition that President Reagan encapsulated in a famous remark where he said something to the effect of what's our strategy toward the Soviet Union? We win, they lose.

Douglas Feith

Right? Now, that was a shocking remark because under, for example the Nixon-Kissinger approach to the Soviet Union was not we win, they lose. It was peaceful coexistence and détente. And so—now, the Nixon-Kissinger strategy was considered a form of containment. And the Reagan strategy was considered a form of containment.

Douglas Feith

But the Reagan strategy aimed at victory. The Nixon strategy aimed at stability, not victory. And so there was quite a substantial difference in approach under a term that everybody could endorse, because nobody was advocating hot war against the Soviet Union. And so if you say the containment means not hot war, that covers a broad spectrum of policies.

Douglas Feith

And likewise with Iraq, the containment approach could have been an umbrella for a lot of different policies. But by 2001, it was quite clear that whatever you called containment wasn't working very well. And the international support for any kind of measures of containment—the international support was diminishing. And so the question at that point was what can we do that's more effective than this combination of weapons inspections, economic sanctions, No Fly Zones, etc.

A Post-9/11 World

Interviewer

So let's go right to immediately after 9/11 because I would like to know, since I think there was general agreement within the administration that Saddam was not directly involved in the 9/11 events. How did nonetheless Iraq enter the discussion in the fall of 2001?

Douglas Feith

Well the first, and obvious, question as soon as 9/11 occurred national security officials were asking whether Iraq played any role at all. Which was a logical question because any

of the major state supporters of terrorism was a possible conspirator and so questions were asked about all of the major state supporters—were any of them involved.

Douglas Feith

And given the fact that Iraq was hostile to the United States, was the only country in the world that had been shooting routinely at American forces because of the No Fly Zone aircraft attacks, and also Saddam was pretty much the only head of government anywhere in the world who actually spoke out in favor of the 9/11 attacks. It was a logical question to ask was Iraq involved. Now, we never came up with any substantial evidence that Iraq was involved. So that just wasn't—it was a perfectly reasonable thing to ask about it, I mean nobody should be shocked that after 9/11 the President and others raised questions about Iraq.

Douglas Feith

But Iraq was not instrumental in the 9/11 attacks and that's that. But, the—and I think we've talked about this before—I mean you can tell me if you want further discussion of it, but the decision that the President made to deal with the 9/11 attack in an unprecedented fashion by saying we were going to take all reasonable measures globally to prevent the next attack—that decision meant that we were going to look at the entire international terrorist network, which included terrorist organizations and their state supporters. We were going to look at it comprehensively. And we were going to try to make sure that none of the serious potential sources of future attacks on the United States was in a position to do a 9/11 type follow up attack.

Douglas Feith

And what that meant was we were not looking only at the groups, individuals, or states that were directly involved in 9/11. We were looking at whatever the source of the next attacks might be from the broader international terrorist network. And when we looked at the broader international terrorist network it included not only al-Qaida but other terrorist organizations. And it included not just Afghanistan but other state supporters of terrorism, whether it's Iran, or North Korea, or Iraq, or Sudan, or Syria, or Libya. I mean, there were a lot of countries that had an active role in working with terrorist organizations and providing them with safe havens, and providing them with weapons, and providing them with finances, and diplomatic support, and the like.

Douglas Feith

And so we were looking comprehensively. And in looking comprehensively one place we were looking was Iraq. Now, another thing that came up early on was we had, as a government, a major problem with lack of specific intelligence on the whereabouts of key terrorist operatives.

Douglas Feith

And so after 9/11, when the question was what can the United States do to disrupt the international terrorist network and protect the United States from follow up attacks? We had a problem that the CIA wasn't in a position to tell our military, you know, here are the specific targets that you can destroy to set the terrorists back. And so our military is sitting around saying if you give us actionable intelligence, we can destroy anything you point us toward.

Douglas Feith

But, the CIA is saying we don't have actionable intelligence. So at that point the top officials in the U.S. government came up with I think a very creative approach to this strategic dilemma, that we didn't have the specific actionable intelligence. And what they said was we may not know precisely where the terrorist operatives are, but we do know where the state supporters are.

Douglas Feith

And so if we can take action that will agitate and intimidate the state supporters of terrorism, these various countries that I just listed, and make them fear that additional terrorist attacks will endanger those regimes, then we may be able to operate indirectly but effectively against terrorist groups that we would like to hit directly, but we don't have the information about where they are. And so we came up with this indirect strategy. And the indirect strategy was doing everything we could to squeeze the terrorist-supporting governments so that they could pull the reins in on the terrorist groups with whom they're in contact.

Douglas Feith

Because we may not know the location of those terrorists, but state supports of them know the location. And so part of the thinking was if we can take effective action, and ultimately the decision was made—for example, if we could take effective against the Taliban, then we may be able to affect the behavior of Syria or Libya or Iraq or others.

Interviewer

Why wouldn't Iran be a better target than Iraq? I would imagine the opportunities, still the case, that these many more cells of Islamic extremism are in Iran than they are Iraq.

Douglas Feith

Yeah. First of all the principle was as I described.

Interviewer

Right. And you've mentioned this before.

Douglas Feith

Right. Okay. And now then you get to this question of if you're going—and I actually worked on this I remember with General Pace. We put together a grid looking at various actions that could be taken against different countries from diplomatic pressure, economic pressure, various types of military pressure from blockade to strikes to invasion. Right?

Douglas Feith

And saying okay, if this is a spectrum of types of pressure that can be brought to bear on different countries, and then we looked at the various countries that we were concerned about—major state supporters of terrorism. We tried to think through, what are the measures that would suffice for different countries. And then we tried to think through the issues of sequencing. What do you do when, and which kinds of actions might be effective if you have earlier taken other actions.

Douglas Feith

Now, in thinking about this, we understood the point that you just made that Iran, for

example, was an active supporter of major terrorist organization, Hezbollah, that until 9/11 had actually had more American blood on its hands than any other terrorist group in the world. So the question was, well why don't we take serious action against Iran?

Douglas Feith

There's also North Korea. A dangerous country, had engaged in various types of terrorism, and was farther along in its nuclear program than either Iran or Iraq. And so the question, why don't we take serious action against North Korea?

Douglas Feith

Well, part of the analysis—and I think it was really a crucial part of the analysis was—it is not practical, it's not reasonable, it's not right or just for the President of the United States to consider taking extremely serious action, like major military action, against a country unless he has exhausted all reasonable means short of war to deal with the problem. And if we were concerned, for example, in 2001 about Iran as a state supporter of terrorism, which we clearly were and the President included Iran in his Axis of Evil speech in January 2002. You know, if we're concerned about Iran, the question is what do we do to bring pressure to bear on Iran to get it to change its policies towards terrorism and weapons of mass destruction?

Douglas Feith

Well, there was an enormous amount of diplomacy that we could do that we had not yet done regarding Iran.

Interviewer

So this argument is then that we were further along in our options with Iraq than we were with Iran.

Douglas Feith

Well, yes. But I wouldn't quite put it that way. What I would say is there's a lot of diplomacy that one needs to try before one considers any type of serious military action. We had not done that diplomacy regarding Iran. We had not done that diplomacy regarding North Korea.

Douglas Feith

We had spent by 2001 over 10 years trying numerous diplomatic approaches regarding Iraq. We had tried weapons inspections, economic sanctions, political demands, No Fly Zones, No Drive Zones, limited strikes like Operation Desert Fox. We had done the No Fly Zone enforcement and the retaliations, the response options. I mean we had really seriously looked at the spectrum of things that could be done to deal with Iraq and there were 16 U.N. Security Council resolutions that testified to the diplomatic energy that went in to this whole policy.

Douglas Feith

And so the President could reasonably conclude after some additional diplomacy which took months, because after all, he finally came to the conclusion that we needed to do something about Iraq and decided to announce it to the world in September 2002. And even then it wasn't until March 2003 that the war was started. And he spent, you know, the whole period from September '02 until March '03 in intense diplomacy at the U.N.

to try to persuade Iraq that we had a credible threat against them if they didn't change their policy.

Interviewer

Could you argue, looking retrospectively—and I realize this is retrospectively, that by choosing to focus our pressure upon Iraq that we precluded the opportunity to go after Iran? Because this country can only stomach so many wars—politically, economically, militarily. If the greater danger comes from Iran, do we sacrifice the opportunity to get that by going to Iraq at that moment?

Douglas Feith

Well, I think that that's essentially what happened. But it wasn't inevitable. When we were looking at it prospectively, the question of how our military action in Iraq was going to affect Iran was an open question. Because after, for example, after we overthrew Saddam, in the immediate period thereafter, the Iranians were eager for diplomacy. And that's when they launched their dialogue with the European Union, you know the British, French, and Germans—the so called EU3. The Iranians noticed that the United States had just overthrown the government to the right of them, and had just overthrown the government to the left of them. And we had Iran's attention.

Douglas Feith

Now, had the War in Iraq gone well, and had we been able to smoothly transition to a new Iraqi government, and had there not been the kind of insurgency that wound up being so costly and protracted, it's very possible that the action against Iraq might have been so effective in affecting the thinking of the Iranian leaders, that you might have had significant changes in Iran and Iran's policies without having to go to war.

Douglas Feith

So when you say what's the most effective policy toward Iran, had the operation in Iraq been very successful that might have been the most effective way of dealing with Iran—without a military strike against Iran. But it didn't turn out that way, and we understood that one of the risks—and in Rumsfeld's parade of horrors memo that we've discussed before, one of the things he said in that memo is that one of the risks of going to war in Iraq is that if the war doesn't go well and we become preoccupied, our preoccupation will be at the expense of other things that we would have wanted to do in the War on Terrorism regarding other countries and other organizations.

Douglas Feith

And we understood—I mean that was a risk, but as I said, it wasn't an inevitability. As it turns out, while we had the Iranian's attention and they were ready to do diplomacy and they made some significant concessions immediately after we overthrew Saddam, when some months later things went badly in Iraq and the United States was bogged down, and it was clear that the war was becomingly extremely costly and unpopular in the United States, the Iranians evidently came to the conclusion that our diplomacy toward them, which we were basically conducting through the Europeans, was not backed by a credible threat of force, and the Iranians hardened their positions. So, I think that was a consequence of the fact that the War in Iraq didn't go well.

Interviewer

Right. But then nobody is justâ€”I guess what youâ€™re saying is that history was unpredictable and maybe foreseen as you said in the horribles memo, as the possibility. But it was also the opposite could have happened.

Douglas Feith

Right.

Ahmed Chalabi
Interviewer

Letâ€™s go to the actual, you know sort of the story of building of a case for Iraq and theâ€”whatâ€™s referred to as the externals. Letâ€™s talk about Ahmed Chalabi for a minute. Tell me who he is, when you first met him, your sense of him as a character, of his character? Sense of him as a player in this story.

Douglas Feith

Chalabi wasâ€”is an Iraqi from a secular Shia familyâ€”well to do family. He went into exile as a young man.

Interviewer

Early, right?

Douglas Feith

Yeah, maybe as a teenager. I donâ€™t remember exactly when, but he was in exile for a long time. Educated in the United States. I think he went to school at maybe MIT and the University of Chicago, some place like that. Anyhow, heâ€™s highly educated, PhD. Very erudite, impressive, and articulate guy. He put together an organization called the Iraq National Congress, or the Iraqi National Congressâ€”the INCâ€”that was an umbrella organization for various anti-Saddam groups that existed either among the exiles or among the Iraqi Kurds.

Douglas Feith

And so all of the main Iraqi opposition groups as they were know, opposition to Saddam, were under the umbrella of the Iraqi National Congress. And Chalabi was very skillful in herding these cats, because there were lots of tensions and disagreements among these groups. But Chalabi did a pretty good job of creating this umbrella organization and got praised for it by Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. Congress in the 1990s.

Douglas Feith

Chalabi became the most prominent Iraqi opposition leader in the 1990s. He worked early on, the Iraqi National Congress and Chalabi worked early on with the CIA in the months and years right after Desert Storm. It may even have been before he created the INC. And then in the mid â€™90s, and I donâ€™t know all the detailsâ€”I mean what I know is from reports that the Senate Intelligence Committee published about this period years later. In the mid â€™90s when there were these coup attempts being made and there was this Bay of Pigs type disaster in Iraq when one of the coups was basically exposed and Saddamâ€™s forces crushed the Iraqi oppositionists who had been working with the CIA.

Douglas Feith

Chalabi got into bitter recriminations with the CIA. Chalabi claims that he warned the CIA that this operation was penetrated and the CIA people he said were incompetent and ignored his warning. And that was the result—the reason that they had this terrible result. Anyway, there was terrible bitterness that developed between Chalabi and the CIA. Real hatred. And that carried over, and it didn't just go to the CIA. It obviously influenced thinking of a number of people in the State Department who did work in this area.

Interviewer

This goes way back to the 1990s.

Douglas Feith

This goes back to the mid 1990s. Nevertheless, Chalabi was the principal voice of the Iraqi opposition in the United States, and specifically in Washington, in the late-1990s. And at the time of the debates throughout 1998, beginning with these public letters that got written about the crumbling of the sanctions regime, up until the passage of the Iraq Liberation Act, Chalabi was the most visible Iraqi oppositionist

Interviewer

Here in Washington.

Douglas Feith

Here in Washington. Supporting the Iraq Liberation Act and the various groups that wanted to take tough action against Saddam and liberate Iraq from Saddam Hussein regime.

Interviewer

Did you meet him in this incarnation?

Douglas Feith

In this period I wasn't terribly active. I knew various people who were much more active in the area. I wasn't terribly active, but I met Chalabi somewhere. I don't remember exactly when, but somewhere in the late 1990s. And so I was aware of him.

Douglas Feith

But he was written about and the Iraq National Congress was written about in numerous Congressional committee reports. And praised as I said by Democrats and Republicans for his diplomatic skill, for his commitment to democracy, for his articulateness, for his opposition to Saddam, for his leadership of these various opposition groups. I mean there's a lot of discussion of him in various Congressional documents on a bipartisan basis that was very favorable—notwithstanding that people within the executive branch, some of the people within the executive branch, especially at the CIA and some at the State Department, were passionately hostile to him.

Douglas Feith

He became a symbol of the school of thought that said economic and other sanctions were not working and a new U.S. and international policy is needed to deal with the Saddam Hussein problem. He became a symbol of the school that advocated regime change rather than containment. And so when that issue became highly controversial in the opening months of the George W. Bush administration, Chalabi became a favorite target of those

people who did not favor the policies that he favored.

Douglas Feith

And, as I recount in my book, Chalabi wound up becoming an extremely influential figure. Not for the direct influence that he had, but because the people who detested him shaped their attitude toward a whole series of policy proposals about dealing with Iraq around their detestation of Chalabi. And some of these people were so passionately antagonistic to Chalabi that they were unwilling to work with the externals as a group out of fear that anything that increased the profile and the political potential of the external groups might redound to the benefit of Chalabi.

Interviewer

I'm unclear on what was they resented so much about Chalabi? Other than the CIA saying that there was a difference of opinion, he resented them for not carrying out their venture with the vigor and competence that he expected. But other than that spat, what else was there that made him such a polarizing figure?

Douglas Feith

The Chalabi issue had a number of parts, and I don't know what the real spring for all of this action was, but you wound up with people who didn't like him personally. They, as I said, you had the bitterness of the recriminations—I mean he accused the CIA of being incompetent, he accused the State Department people of being incompetent—they returned the favor by attacking him. So you have these kind of personal, a lot of personal bitterness.

Douglas Feith

You had philosophical issues in that he was advocating tough action against Saddam. And the issue of tougher action against Saddam was very controversial. So the people who didn't want tougher action and opposed the idea of military action against Saddam, didn't like Chalabi.

Douglas Feith

There were also personal issues that got involved. His—he was very unpopular with a lot of the Arab political leadership in the Middle East because he represented two main ideas. One was advocacy of democracy for Iraq and the other was he was a Shia. And so if he became a leader in Iraq, that would be the first time that the Middle East had, in the Arab world, serious Shia leadership of a major country. And

Interviewer

Recognizing that Iran is not

Douglas Feith

Iran is not an Arab country. And so the Arab political leaders throughout the Middle East are Sunni. And the Shias had no political power to any substantial degree except in Lebanon in a kind of a unique situation.

Douglas Feith

But outside of Lebanon, and various Sunni countries, even Sunni run countries that have

Shia majorities, the Shias have no substantial political power. So here you have Chalabi advocating Shia political power exercised through Democratic means. And for Sunni leaders who didn't want the Shias to exercise political power, and even less wanted them to exercise it through democratic means, Chalabi was a big problem there.

Douglas Feith

Chalabi had been in Jordan at a time when King Hussein was Saddam Hussein's biggest ally in the Middle East. I mean people generally think of King Hussein of Jordan as a friend of the United States. They tend to people who think that way tend to forget that during the Gulf War, 1990-91, Saddam Hussein's closest ally in the Arab world was King Hussein of Jordan. And here you have in Jordan

Interviewer

"Abstaining essentially from the war, isn't that right? Jordan essentially abstained rather than participate in the Gulf First Gulf War"

Douglas Feith

Well, he even cooperated with Saddam in many ways. I mean he didn't actively fight for him but he certainly didn't fight with us. And anyway, that was just a major political reality at the time.

Douglas Feith

And so one of the things that happened was when Chalabi was living in Jordan, and became an outspoken opponent of Saddam Hussein, the government of King Hussein set up I think it was a military tribunal that accused Chalabi of some kind of fraud or stealing from a bank that Chalabi had established. So adding into this mix you had the attack on Chalabi's uprightness, that he was a crook and he was a liar and that was one of the attacks that was made. It happened to be, as I said, it was made by a military court under the King Hussein regime. And Chalabi denied it but there it was. And people who didn't like Chalabi would site that as a reason not to trust him. Anyway"

Interviewer

He doesn't sound like a very good person to hang around with if you're about to

Douglas Feith

Well, it depends. If you read these Congressional reports of people who spent a lot of time with Chalabi working on Iraq issues and the Iraq Liberation Act, they praised him to the skies. If you talk to the people that didn't like him, they didn't like him. So I mean basically there were mixed views.

Interviewer

And within Iraq, did he have legitimacy within Iraq?

Douglas Feith

Who know? This is an interesting issue. Throughout the twentieth century, there are so many examples in history of people speculating about public opinion in totalitarian countries. Who has support? Who has legitimacy? And I mean what did people say about

the Soviet Union and the Soviet government?

Douglas Feith

Until it collapsed, you know, our experts in the CIA were telling you that the Soviet government had legitimacy. I'm sure there were people who thought that Ceausescu had legitimacy up until the revolution when people executed him. The thing is, I think any serious student of history takes with a grain of salt assertions about public opinion in totalitarian countries. You just don't know. And"

Love & Hate Relationship With Chalabi
Interviewer

I guess I meant his legitimacy not only in terms of sitting in favor within his country, but also did he have a perspective upon Iraq that we could rely upon in terms of being someone we might"who might eventually be a political leader?

Douglas Feith

He struck a number of people in Washington as a very bright, very articulate, very highly politically skilled operator.

Interviewer

He struck you this way too?

Douglas Feith

Yeah, I met him. As I said, I didn't have a lot to do with him, but"

Interviewer

Within this context though did you"

Douglas Feith

The people who praised these talents in him made a credible case to people who met Chalabi. In other words, when I met Chalabi and I had heard he's very smart, he speaks beautifully about democracy. He obviously has political skill, personal charm, leadership qualities. I mean that was all clear if you sat down and talked with him for half an hour"all of that became clear. Now, when some people said you know, he's slick, he's dishonest, he was accused by King Hussein of these malefactions regarding the bank and all the rest"I had no way of judging whether that's true"I mean I didn't have an opinion one way or the other. I didn't say it was false. I didn't know it was false, I didn't know it was true. I knew it was just hanging out there.

Douglas Feith

But as far as the fact that he's impressive, articulate, and has leadership qualities"that was obvious. What happened in this debate within the U.S. government. You asked about how did Chalabi affect U.S. policy? What I noticed, which was interesting, is there were people who were passionately against Chalabi, passionately, and they hated him. I certainly wasn't in that category, but I didn't find that there were people who loved Chalabi as passionately as the people who hated him hated him.

Douglas Feith

What was interesting was that the people who hated him and decided that it was crucial for the United States to block Chalabi— now whether this was something that they spontaneously developed as U.S. officials on their own or whether they were reflecting the views of Arab leaders in the Middle East who had very strong interests in wanting to oppose a guy like Chalabi, as a democrat, as a Shiite, as an anti-Saddam guy, right? I mean there are all kinds of interests involved here too.

Douglas Feith

But there were various U.S. officials who were either on their own or reflecting local opinion, passionately against Chalabi. One of the things they did, these U.S. officials did, was the people who didn't share their views were accused of wanting to anoint Chalabi as the leader of Iraq. So, this became a standard kind of criticism against me, against Paul Wolfowitz, against Rumsfeld. Now, we never had the idea of anointing Chalabi as the leader of Iraq. And this was something that Rumsfeld had intense views about, that the United States should not be in the business of picking other country's leaders.

Douglas Feith

Rumsfeld insisted that our role should be to try to create some framework for a system within which the Iraqi people would pick their own leader if we ever got to the point where we took military action to remove Saddam. He had a similar view, by the way, about Afghanistan. And the Pentagon was not active in the process by which the U.N. working with Zalmay Khalilzad and others set up the so-called Bonn Process that put Karzai in as the interim Chairman of the Afghan government.

Douglas Feith

Rumsfeld felt very strongly about this and would never have supported— I mean even if he had had anybody who was inclined to want to anoint Chalabi, and— I wasn't and I don't believe Wolfowitz was, and I don't know anybody who was. But even if he had anybody inclined to do that, Rumsfeld would never have permitted that.

Interviewer

And what role did Chalabi play?

Douglas Feith

The role that Chalabi played, interestingly enough, is even though the people who hated him, accused their bureaucratic rivals of wanting to anoint Chalabi, that wasn't the case. But, there was one of the major issues about Iraq policy was whether we were going to have a liberation of Iraq or an occupation of Iraq. And the President early on said our strategy for Iraq has to be liberation, not occupation.

Douglas Feith

And when he said it at that level of generality, everybody in the U.S. government said amen. So, there was no dispute in principle that we should have a strategy of liberation, not occupation. A number of us said, okay what does that mean in practice? How do you implement a strategy of liberation rather than occupation? And we said the key is you've got to work with Iraqis. Right? So that we are partnering with Iraqis to liberate their country, rather than coming in and just doing stuff to Iraq. And so we proposed working with Iraqis on intelligence. Working with Iraqis to train some—a few thousand

Iraqis militarily before the war.

Interviewer

These are all externals as you call them?

Douglas Feith

Yeah, externals. Because the only Iraqis you could work with obviously were either the Kurds or the exiles. And the term external meant Kurds and exiles. And the reason thatâ€”the Kurds, just to clarify, the Kurds living in autonomous northern Iraq were not under Saddamâ€™s control but were not exiles. And so the term exile would exclude the Kurdsâ€”and since weâ€™re talking about all the anti-Saddam opposition people that included exiles plus Kurds, and so the term externals was used to cover both of those groups.

Douglas Feith

So, we said the key to a strategy of liberation rather than occupation was working with the externals on intelligence cooperation, on a political conference before any war, on military training, right? That was the key. At every time there was a proposal to work with the externals, there was strong opposition from the leadership in the State Department and the CIA. And it was largely motivated, and often explicitly explained, as opposition to doing anything that could increase the chances that Chalabi would play a leadership role on post-Saddam Iraq. And for some of us we said whyâ€”I mean why is that an issue?

Douglas Feith

Weâ€™re not interested in anointing him, but we shouldnâ€™t shape our entire policy around blocking him. It made no sense. And yet for some people in the U.S. government, that became a major factor in their approach to crucial elements of our strategy. So for example, we proposed training a few thousand Iraqis militarily before the war so that they could work with CENTCOM. They could be cultural advisors, they could be interpreters, they could be scouts, they could help us after Saddam was removed in vetting Iraqiâ€”I mean if we had worked with people who we had trained and we had a few thousand people that we trusted, whose skills we knew, whose political philosophies we knew by working with themâ€”people whose character we knew, whose leadership qualities we knewâ€”they could be enormously helpful in helping us judge which Iraqis we should be working with, in avoiding the kinds of mistakes that our troops wound up making where we would go into some area and appoint somebody as a local mayor or governor who turned out to be extremely unpopular, with a reputation as a corrupt guy or as a brutal guy or as a Baathist, a torturer, whatever.

Douglas Feith

And it was so clearly sensible to try to train a few thousand Iraqis in advance. George Tenet, CIA director, in his book says that he advised CENTCOM not to participate in the training or Iraqis militarily before the war.

Interviewer

Why?

Douglas Feith

Because he says it was simply an effort by the Pentagon people to try to help Chalabi.

Now, it wasn't. It was an effort to do the things that I just described. But the way it's so interesting that even after the fact, the way George Tenet tells the story is in opposition to Chalabi, he was against doing something that was so patently sensible that he boasts that he advised General Franks to oppose the training.

Douglas Feith

Now, by the way, for various reasons, and there were a lot of complex reasons. For various reasons, we wound up instead of training the three to five thousand people that we had originally proposed when we set up this training program, the United States trained 73 people I think it was. Instead of three to five thousand, we trained 73 before the war.

Douglas Feith

We set up a whole training facility in Hungary which General Barno ran before General Barno went to Afghanistan, to train the so-called Free Iraqi Forces, and it was a bust. I mean 73 instead of thousands. And it was a bust in large part because of the hostility of the CIA and State Department leadership, and then influenced the CENTCOM leadership. Now, as I said, there were other reasons as I explained in my book. There were also recruitment problems. I mean there were all kinds of reasons. But this hostility was very interesting.

Douglas Feith

I'll give you one other example. It was proposed in deputies discussions in January 2002 that the U.S. government help organize a political conference of the Iraqi externals so that they could come up with principles about what kind of Iraq should exist. What kind of political principles should govern Iraq and if it turns out there was going to be a new government in Iraq, a post-Saddam government in Iraq, what are the kinds of principles that would govern that new group of leaders.

Douglas Feith

And so we proposed that various officials proposed that in January 2002 and Steve Hadley, the Deputy National Security Advisor, asked Rich Armitage, the Deputy Secretary of State, to organize the political conference. At first Armitage said he'll organize it in April 2002. Then Armitage came back and said he wants it to be a political conference that includes all the Iraqi external groups except Chalabi and Chalabi's people.

Douglas Feith

So Hadley came back and said that's ridiculous. It has to be everybody. Why would you single out Chalabi and exclude him? So, Armitage then said if I recall correctly, well we can do it but it won't be before June. And this annoyed Hadley who was running the deputy's committee on this and said you know, that's a long time to delay you know, five months is an eternity. Well

Interviewer

He tried to stall in other words

Douglas Feith

So but then the State Department kicked it from June to September and from September until December. And so here we are, starting in January 2002 discussing this. And we were discussing it for action that was supposed to be preliminary to any kind of change of

government in Iraq, any kind of war.

Douglas Feith

The war happened in March of 2003 and the State Department slow rolled this and opposed this, and as I said the original opposition started with we want all groups other than Chalabi, right? And they slow rolled it from January 2002 until December 2002—11 months! An extraordinary rear guard action.

Interviewer

Here's a couple of things I don't understand, although we do have to stop because we're kind of at the end of this session. But if Chalabi was so polarizing, as clearly he was, and drove a wedge essentially—chicken or egg who did it, but drove a wedge between the Pentagon and the State and CIA, then why wouldn't the Pentagon get behind someone else like Allawi or—

Douglas Feith

We didn't get behind anybody. See the issue was not who did you pick. From the point of view of Chalabi's opponents, they were unwilling to do anything to help the externals because they were afraid that anything that redounded to the general credit of the externals might redound to Chalabi's personal benefit.

Interviewer

And so your argument was—

Douglas Feith

And our argument was we can't pick the leaders of Iraq. We should—

Interviewer

We can't risk losing the externals merely because of our animosity towards Chalabi.

Douglas Feith

Well, there was no—I mean the externals were all of the Iraqis that we could possibly work with. What we saw was that—if you don't work with the externals, then when you overthrow Saddam if you're starting from square one on all governance issues, on all military issues, on all intelligence issues, then you—I failed to mention the most important point here, which is the State Department was arguing throughout this period that when we overthrew Saddam we should not allow the Iraqis to quickly achieve leadership in their own country. That we should have what the State Department called a multiyear transitional period in which the United States would run Iraq and cultivate a non-external Iraqi leadership.

Douglas Feith

I mean the only hope that we had of trying to create an Iraqi government soon after Saddam's overthrow, right? Because after all the Baathists had run Iraq for 30 years—they had traumatized the country. There was no political leadership, non-dictatorial political leadership ready to arise in Iraq. I mean anybody who had any political thoughts at all had been killed unless they supported Saddam, so the only hope that we had of any quick political transition to Iraqi leadership was based on working with externals plus

others.

Interviewer

Just this last question and then we shut off. Do you think that State was speaking from the perspective to their relationshipsâ€” diplomatic relationships throughout the rest of the Arab world that were fearful of the Shiaâ€”

Douglas Feith

Of Shia political power and of democracyâ€”

Interviewer

Yeah, yeah.

Douglas Feith

Yeah, I suspect that that was an element.

Interviewer

Okay, weâ€™ll pick this up next week.