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Bush was demanding excuse to invade Iraq in January 2001, says ex-treasury secretary

By Andrew Gumbel, in Los Angeles

12 January 2004

The Bush administration started making detailed plans for the invasion of Iraq within days of coming to office, with the President himself anxious to find a pretext to overthrow Saddam Hussein, a high-ranking former cabinet member said yesterday.

The revelation is the latest in a string of potential embarrassments for the White House offered by the former treasury secretary Paul O'Neill, who has gone on the record for a new book looking at his bumpy two years at the centre of US power, *The Price of Loyalty*.

Mr O'Neill said invading Iraq was "topic A" at the very first meeting of President George Bush's National Security Council, 10 days after his inauguration on 20 January 2001, and continued to be an abiding theme in follow-up meetings.

"From the very first instance, it was about Iraq," said Mr O'Neill, who was a participant in all the meetings and provided voluminous minutes and other documents to the book's author, Ron Suskind. "It was all about finding a way to do it. That was the tone of it. The President saying 'Go find me a way to do this'."

Mr O'Neill is the first cabinet member to implicate directly Mr Bush in planning a war against Iraq so early in his presidency. One of the documents passed to Mr Suskind was a secret dossier from the first few weeks of the administration entitled "Plan for post-Saddam Iraq". The disclosure will provide further ammunition for to Bush critics who believe the administration cynically exploited the 11 September terror attacks to launch an aggressive policy of global military interventionism that neo-conservative hawks such as Dick Cheney, the Vice-President, and Donald Rumsfeld, the Defence Secretary, had been advocating for years.

It makes clear that hints of a link between Saddam and the 11 September attacks, repeatedly made by administration officials in the run-up to the war but never substantiated, were a political convenience, not the driving motivation behind the invasion. And it also poses a considerable challenge to the official version of history, which has sought to portray Mr Bush as undergoing a near-religious conversion after 11 September from a meek peacetime leader to a man with a global mission to stamp out evil.

Mr O'Neill, who spoke to CBS's *60 Minutes* news programme yesterday, said he was surprised nobody at the NSC meetings asked questions such as "Why Saddam?" or "Why now?" "For me," he added, "the notion of pre-emption, that the US has the unilateral right to do whatever we decide to do, is really a huge leap."


It has been clear for some time that the neo-conservatives in the administration were pushing such unilateralism. Mr Bush came to office pledging the opposite - an aversion to so-called "nation-building" and the commitment of US troops to world trouble-spots.

The former treasury secretary gives a unflattering portrait of the President in the

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book and in follow-up interviews, describing him as disengaged from the issues and apparently uninterested in dialogue with advisers. In cabinet meetings, Mr O'Neill said, the President was "like a blind man in a roomful of deaf people" - having nothing to say and allowing others to fix the agenda.

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