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'Time for a Change'

A group of 27 retired ambassadors and military commanders are calling for a dramatic overhaul of the Bush administration's foreign policy

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WEB EXCLUSIVE

By **Brian Braiker**

Newsweek

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June 16 - Ambassadors and military commanders are a rare breed. Those who do their jobs well often serve under several presidents, carrying out the policies designed by administrations of both parties. They are not usually known for taking a stand against the government they work for; quietly and proudly, they serve their country. Until now.

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Billing themselves as Diplomats and Military Commanders for Change, 27 retired senior government officials released a statement Wednesday morning claiming George W. Bush's foreign policy has damaged the United States's reputation abroad, making the country less safe and isolated from its natural allies. The U.S. invaded Iraq with dubious evidence of weapons of mass destruction and without a clear exit strategy, they claim, endangering the lives of U.S. soldiers and destabilizing the entire region. Their unusual stand includes an appeal to voters to remove the incumbent from the White House this fall.

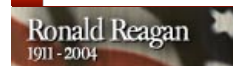
"Over nearly half a century we have worked energetically in all regions of the world, often in very difficult circumstances, to build piece by piece a structure of respect and influence for the United States that has served our country very well over the last 60 years," Phyllis Oakley, a member of the group, told the National Press Club in Washington earlier today. Others include Gen. Merrill McPeak, former chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force; Chas Freeman, a former ambassador to Saudi Arabia; Adm. William Crowe, who as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under George H.W. Bush, was America's top military officer, and Adm. Stansfield Turner, a former director of the CIA. "Today we see that structure crumbling under an administration blinded by ideology and

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a callous indifference to the realities of the world around it," said Oakley. Never before have so many of us felt the need for a major change in the direction of our foreign policy."

Oakley has served under every administration from Ford to Clinton, including as deputy State Department spokesperson under Reagan and an assistant secretary of State for Clinton. She spoke with NEWSWEEK's Brian Braiker about the diplomats' rare decision to take a stand against a sitting administration's policies, and answered critics who claim her group is composed of adherents of an obsolete foreign-policy philosophy. Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: What specifically did the Bush administration do that you find objectionable, and what are the tangible results that you feel are proof the foreign policy is flawed?

Phyllis Oakley: We would all start with Iraq. No matter what you felt about the intelligence going in, it's clear now that the intelligence was manipulated for political reasons. We've not found the WMD; there were no links established to Al Qaeda, although I understand the vice president continues to make that assertion. Clearly Saddam was a bad guy and everybody is glad that he's gone. But we can't go around the world just taking out bad guys. We only have to look at the current disaster to realize what a terrible position we're in.



Phyllis Oakley at the National Press Club: 'It is time for a change'

Some of your critics have said that the United States is in Iraq because of policies that were set in motion and carried out by the very retired diplomats and military commanders in your group who got the country into this situation in the first place. How do you respond to that?

[Laughs.] There they go again, saying "It's all your fault, and we're just cleaning up." I think that we would all agree that no matter what we did about terrorism, it has not been enough. You just have to accept that, but, nevertheless, the edifice of alliances and structures and friendships that the United States has built up and that we feel we've been a part of over the last 50 years had

enabled us to make some real advances against terrorists and Al Qaeda. You can't do it without other countries. You can't do it without law enforcement and intelligence and military cooperation and diplomatic initiatives. You need it all.

The Bush administration did go to the United Nations Security Council twice. They can point to allies like Britain and other countries that are fighting in Iraq alongside U.S. troops. Did Washington really go alone?

Of course we didn't go alone. But aside from the U.K., they are not the heavy hitters. I think if we had approached it differently, if we had been a little bit more patient, if the mind had not been made up already to go into Iraq, we would have been in a much stronger position. We would have had a stronger coalition. Furthermore, the war in Iraq would have been seen as legitimate. I do not believe around the world our invasion of Iraq and our current occupation have been seen as legitimate. We're getting back to that because we have gone back to the U.N., and we got a unanimous Security Council resolution for the steps that are now being taken so brilliantly by [U.N. special envoy] Lakhdar Brahimi to internationalize this and give the U.N. a say in the new government. But we're not there yet.

Where do you draw the line with Saddam, though? Back in the 1980s when he was gassing his own people, the U.S. didn't do anything.

We spoke out about it. It was true that we did not invade then and do anything. We fought the Gulf War [in 1991] and the question of whether we should have gone to Baghdad is still debatable. Clearly this administration took one view. We bottled Saddam Hussein up pretty well in the 1990s. The Oil-for-Food program became corrupt, no doubt about it. We were complicit in that as well. I think there were periods in '98 where we could have struck him harder. I think we could have squeezed even harder, gotten the U.N. inspectors back, got more intelligence. There were other ways to do it. Squeezing is a slow process—it's never as neat and clean—but I think there are other alternatives.

What's happening now, you're saying, isn't neat and clean either.

Neat and clean? I mean, [it's] dangerous! [It's] fomenting resentment. It's dangerous for the future of Iraq. It's dangerous for the status of the whole Middle East. One does not hear anymore about transforming [Iraq] into this wonderful democratic trust. I think at this point it looks like if the U.S. can get out without its tail between its legs, we're going to be lucky.

But what about the interim government and the June 30 deadline to hand over power. Doesn't that instill a little confidence?

No, it doesn't. Look at the attacks that are still taking place on senior Iraqi officials. How much sovereignty are they going to have? They're still going to need American soldiers. Is this new government going to be able to really get some traction and start to do things, or are the insurgents going to continue? And we don't know the answers to these questions, and we don't have a really good exit strategy for Iraq.

What is your group proposing the next step be? You are calling not only for a foreign-policy change, but you want this administration out?

We try to explain we're an ad hoc group; we're not an association or a club or anything. We are a group of like-minded retired senior career officials, and we feel the



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status of the United States is in such jeopardy that we must speak out as citizens using our experience to call for a change in administration. We need a change in the foreign policy. We have not considered next steps. Everyone keeps asking "Are you going to endorse Kerry now?" Many individuals will take further actions, but we as a group have not yet decided on next steps.

Civil servants such as yourself build their careers on carrying out the policy of whatever the current administration happens to be....

Of course [we do], but that was while we were on active duty.

But a situation like this, where you have highly skilled retired career diplomats and military commanders speak out so vehemently against a policy, seems totally unprecedented. Has this ever happened before?

Not that we know of. It *is* unprecedented, and we have all felt a little uncomfortable about assuming such a public political role. We've been good, loyal civil servants. I know very often in the United States that civil servants are dissed because they're nothing but red-tape bureaucrats, et cetera. But those of us who have labored long in the vineyard for U.S. foreign policy feel so strongly. We do feel we have experience in the world. We've been out there on the front lines for a long time. We have friends and acquaintances overseas who talk to us about the status of the United States, and we are simply so deeply concerned that we felt morally impelled to speak out and to take this step.

You see this as a moral issue?

Yes. We do feel that it is our duty and that the fate of the United States—its status, our ultimate well-being, that of our children and grandchildren—is tied up in how the United States acts.

The White House is writing you off as a group of old timers. Realpolitik is dead, they say. How do you respond to that?

[Laughs.] Yeah. Parts of realpolitik are dead. There has always been realpolitik in American foreign policy, from the days of George Washington on. I am acquainted enough with American diplomatic history to say there always has been and there always will be realpolitik.

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