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Feith's version

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By Daniel Gallington - I first met Doug Feith in 1984; the year he would come to the Pentagon as a 27-year-old "DASD" (deputy assistant secretary of defense) and political appointee working for Richard Perle.

Mr. Feith would also become my boss in "multilateral negotiations," DOD-speak for participation in various United Nations-chartered arms-control and national-security-related negotiations.

I was in the Air Force then, doing my first Washington tour after the War College. But I was no stranger to international negotiations, having spent years doing them as part of my duties in Europe and Asia. Probably because of this, Doug asked me, either the first or second time we talked, "whether I minded working for somebody younger." I thought: "Uh oh, watch out — a whiz kid with a big ego!"

But without hesitation, I said "no, provided you can handle someone smarter than you." He laughed — a secure and genuine laugh — the right reaction to an impertinent comment like mine. I knew right away we would get along famously and be good friends. We did and still are.

But I have also been one his more constant critics over the years, never sparing him from the ironies of our work — and I am probably one of the few people who can break him up even when he is at his most serious. It was for this reason, that when I again worked for him at the Pentagon in 2001-02, our colleagues insisted I sit up front in our staff meetings and banter with him. It served to lighten the otherwise grim tasks of dealing with the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and the war on terror.

So, I wasn't surprised when Doug asked me to "write something" about his new book, "War and Decision." While not a book review as such, here are some of my specific reactions to it:

(1) Unlike most of the "Washington insider" books I have seen over the years, this is a very carefully written and serious historical work, and will be required reading for someone who wants a better understanding of why and how we went to war in Iraq. And, especially for the Iraq war critics, the book allows one to put strong opinions aside for a moment and learn about the decision process and how it ended up where it did. It's all here — and, whether one agrees with it or not, it's fascinating story and very well told.

(2) The book is extremely well-documented; so well so it will become a basic source document about the war. Doug Feith is a both a lawyer and a scholar — and the meticulous preparation required of both disciplines is evident throughout. This is such refreshing change from this genre of books — those that make sweeping statements or conclusions without any reference or citation of support.

(3) Mr. Feith's development of the timeline in the decision to go to war demonstrates — probably better than any other Washington political insider story — how the U.S. national security policy "process" really works. And, how small a role any individual participant really has, especially when it's looked at in totality.

The State Department and the intelligence community each has its ways to offset or collaterally attack the Defense Department policy juggernaut and don't hesitate to use them, no matter that the seniors in each organization are supposed to be loyal to the same president and how he views the issues. This is how the game is played and always has been.

(4) The more significant weaknesses of the interagency policy process in the decision to go to war in Iraq (and in the Bush administration in general), seemed to be centered at the National Security Council (NSC), then headed by Condoleezza Rice. While there could be a lot of structural and procedural reasons for this (and it was the NSC's first big test) it's also clear Miss Rice was not an effective leader.

On this point, Mr. Feith diplomatically notes he was struck by the "lack of clarity" in the interagency decisionmaking process; this because Miss Rice's practice was to "paper over, rather than resolve, important differences of opinion."

Was it ego? Did she not want to acknowledge that she was unable, therefore

unwilling to resolve the bigger issues? While it certainly looks that way, Mr. Feith softens the blow with this observation: "Her pursuit of harmony came, at times, at the expense of clarity." No kidding! However, the practical result is that we went to war without a policy consensus on a number of key issues.

(5) The president's decision to go to war in Iraq is explained and defended as best it can be, though it probably was a mistake, in that if we knew then what we know now we probably would not have done it. Quite simply, the decision was based on the determination that Iraq presented the most serious threat to U.S. security at the time, and that there was a very high likelihood Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and would use them. Again, and to be fair, this was also the shared — albeit incorrect — assessment of the world's more competent intelligence services at the time.

(6) Mr. Feith is both candid and critical about how the immediate and near-term postwar situation was "managed" in Iraq. The book makes it clear how this set in motion most of the policies and institutions that have resulted in (at least contributed to) the chaos that has persisted in Iraq since the war. And — in this respect — there still seems plenty of blame to go around.

In sum, Doug Feith's new book — "War and Decision" — is the best and most objective account to date of the high-level and inside policy dynamics that led to the war in Iraq. It a far "better read" than other books on the subject (e.g., former CIA Director George Tenet's book) that serve primarily to distance the authors from the policies they were an essential part of.

Mr. Feith makes no attempt to separate himself from the president's decision to go to war. In the final analysis, however, Mr. Feith's account is also an intricate study of how an elite group of very smart and well-intentioned people can get it mostly wrong.

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