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Bush Began to Plan War Three Months After 9/11
Book Says President Called Secrecy Vital

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Beginning in late December 2001, President Bush met repeatedly with Army Gen. Tommy R. Franks and his war cabinet to plan the U.S. attack on Iraq even as he and administration spokesmen insisted they were pursuing a diplomatic solution, according to a new book on the origins of the war.

The intensive war planning throughout 2002 created its own momentum, according to "Plan of Attack" by Bob Woodward, fueled in part by the CIA's conclusion that Saddam Hussein could not be removed from power except through a war and CIA Director George J. Tenet's assurance to the president that it was a "slam dunk" case that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction.

In 3 1/2 hours of interviews with Woodward, an assistant managing editor at The Washington Post, Bush said that the secret planning was necessary to avoid "enormous international angst and domestic speculation" and that "war is my absolute last option."

Adding to the momentum, Woodward writes, was the pressure from advocates of war inside the administration. Vice President Cheney, whom Woodward describes as a "powerful, steamrolling force," led that group and had developed what some of his colleagues felt was a "fever" about removing Hussein by force.

By early January 2003, Bush had made up his mind to take military action against Iraq, according to the book. But Bush was so concerned that the government of his closest ally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, might fall because of his support for Bush that he delayed the war's start until March 19 here (March 20 in Iraq) because Blair asked him to seek a second resolution from the United Nations. Bush later gave Blair the option of withholding British troops from combat, which Blair rejected. "I said I'm with you. I mean it," Blair replied.

Woodward describes a relationship between Cheney and Secretary of State Colin L. Powell that became so strained Cheney and Powell are barely on speaking terms. Cheney engaged in a bitter and eventually winning struggle over Iraq with Powell, an opponent of war who believed Cheney was obsessively trying to establish a connection between Iraq and the al Qaeda terrorist network and treated ambiguous intelligence as fact.

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Vice President Cheney is described as "steamrolling force" who had developed what some colleagues felt was a "fever" about removing the Iraqi leader by force. (Mark Humphrey -- AP)
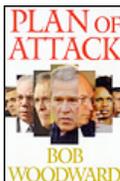
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Transcript:
The Post's **Bob Woodward** was online to discuss his new book and Bush's march to war in Iraq.

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Read more about "**Plan of Attack**," the new book by Bob Woodward. Excerpts were published exclusively on washingtonpost.com and in The Post from April 18 through April 22.

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Powell felt Cheney and his allies -- his chief aide, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby; Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz; and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas J. Feith and what Powell called Feith's "Gestapo" office -- had established what amounted to a separate government. The vice president, for his part, believed Powell was mainly concerned with his own popularity and told friends at a dinner he hosted a year ago celebrating the outcome of the war that Powell was a problem and "always had major reservations about what we were trying to do."

Before the war with Iraq, Powell bluntly told Bush that if he sent U.S. troops there "you're going to be owning this place." Powell and his deputy and closest friend, Richard L. Armitage, used to refer to what they called "the Pottery Barn rule" on Iraq: "You break it, you own it," according to Woodward.

But, when asked personally by the president, Powell agreed to make the U.S. case against Hussein at the United Nations in February 2003, a presentation described by White House communications director Dan Bartlett as "the Powell buy-in." Bush wanted someone with Powell's credibility to present the evidence that Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, a case the president had initially found less than convincing when presented to him by CIA Deputy Director John E. McLaughlin at a White House meeting on Dec. 21, 2002.

McLaughlin's version used communications intercepts, satellite photos, diagrams and other intelligence. "Nice try," Bush said when the CIA official was finished, according to the book. "I don't think this quite -- it's not something that Joe Public would understand or would gain a lot of confidence from."

He then turned to Tenet, McLaughlin's boss, and said, "I've been told all this intelligence about having WMD, and this is the best we've got?"

"It's a slam-dunk case," Tenet replied, throwing his arms in the air. Bush pressed him again. "George, how confident are you?"

"Don't worry, it's a slam dunk," Tenet repeated.

Tenet later told associates he should have said the evidence on weapons was not ironclad, according to Woodward. After the CIA director made a rare public speech in February defending the CIA's handling of intelligence about Iraq, Bush called him to say he had done "a great job."

In his previous book, "Bush at War," Woodward described the administration's response to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001: its decision to attack the Taliban government in Afghanistan and its increasing focus on Iraq. His new book is a narrative history of how Bush and his administration launched the war on Iraq. It is based on interviews with more than 75 people, including Bush and Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld.

On Nov. 21, 2001, 72 days after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Bush directed Rumsfeld to begin planning for war with Iraq. "Let's get started on this," Bush recalled saying. "And get Tommy Franks looking at what it would take to protect America by removing Saddam Hussein if we have to." He also asked: Could this be done on a basis that would not be terribly noticeable?

Bush received his first detailed briefing on Iraq war plans five weeks later, on Dec. 28, when Gen. Tommy R. Franks, the head of the U.S. Central Command, visited Bush at his ranch in Crawford, Tex. Bush told reporters afterward that they had discussed Afghanistan.

While it has been previously reported that Bush directed the Pentagon to begin considering options for an invasion of Iraq immediately after the Sept. 11 attacks, Bush's order to Rumsfeld began an intensive process in which Franks worked in secret with a small staff, talked almost daily with the defense secretary and met about once a month with Bush.

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This week, the president acknowledged that the violent uprising against U.S. troops in Iraq has resulted in "a tough, tough series of weeks for the American people." But he insisted that his course of action in Iraq has been the correct one in language that echoed what he told Woodward more than four months ago.

In two interviews with Woodward in December, Bush minimized the failure to find the weapons of mass destruction, expressed no doubts about his decision to invade Iraq, and enunciated an activist role for the United States based on it being "*the* beacon for freedom in the world."

"I believe we have a duty to free people," Bush told Woodward. "I would hope we wouldn't have to do it militarily, but we have a duty."

The president described praying as he walked outside the Oval Office after giving the order to begin combat operations against Iraq, and the powerful role his religious beliefs played throughout that time.

"Going into this period, I was praying for strength to do the Lord's will. . . . I'm surely not going to justify war based upon God. Understand that. Nevertheless, in my case I pray that I be as good a messenger of His will as possible. And then, of course, I pray for personal strength and for forgiveness."

The president told Woodward: "I am prepared to risk my presidency to do what I think is right. I was going to act. And if it could cost the presidency, I fully realized that. But I felt so strongly that it was the right thing to do that I was prepared to do so."

Asked by Woodward how history would judge the war, Bush replied: "History. We don't know. We'll all be dead."

The president told Woodward he was cooperating on his book because he wanted the story of how the United States had gone to war in Iraq to be told. He said it would be a blueprint of historical significance that "will enable other leaders, if they feel like they have to go to war, to spare innocent citizens and their lives."

"But the news of this, in my judgment," Bush added, "the big news out of this isn't how George W. makes decisions. To me the big news is America has changed how you fight and win war, and therefore makes it easier to keep the peace in the long run. And that's the historical significance of this book, as far as I'm concerned."

Bush's critics have questioned whether he and his administration were focused on Iraq rather than terrorism when they took office early in 2001 and even after the Sept. 11 attacks. Former Treasury secretary Paul H. O'Neill and former White House counterterrorism coordinator Richard A. Clarke have made that charge in recently published memoirs.

According to "Plan of Attack," it was Cheney who was particularly focused on Iraq before the terrorist attacks. Before Bush's inauguration, Cheney sent word to departing Defense Secretary William S. Cohen that he wanted the traditional briefing given an incoming president to be a serious "discussion about Iraq and different options." Bush specifically assigned Cheney to focus as vice president on intelligence scenarios, particularly the possibility that terrorists would obtain nuclear or biological weapons.

Early discussions among the administration's national security "principals" -- Cheney, Powell, Tenet and national security adviser Condoleezza Rice -- and their deputies focused on how to weaken Hussein diplomatically. But Deputy Defense Secretary Wolfowitz proposed sending in the military to seize Iraq's southern oil fields and establish the area as a foothold from which opposition groups could overthrow Hussein.

Powell dismissed the plan as "lunacy," according to Woodward, and told Bush what he thought. "You don't have to be bullied into this," Powell said.

Bush told Woodward he never saw a formal plan for a quick strike. "The idea may have floated around as an interesting nugget to chew on," he said.

White House Chief of Staff Andrew H. Card Jr., according to Woodward, compared Bush to a circus rider with one foot on a "diplomacy" steed and the other on a "war" steed, both heading toward the same destination: regime change in Iraq. When it was clear that diplomacy would not get him to his goal, Card said, Bush let go of that horse and rode the one called war.

But as the planning proceeded, the administration began taking steps that Woodward describes as helping to make war inevitable. On Feb. 16, 2002, Bush signed an intelligence finding that directed the CIA to help the military overthrow Hussein and conduct operations within Iraq. At the time, according to "Plan of Attack," the CIA had only four informants in Iraq and told Bush that it would be impossible to overthrow Hussein through a coup.

In July, a CIA team entered northern Iraq and began to lay the groundwork for covert action, eventually recruiting an extensive network of 87 Iraqi informants code-named ROCKSTARS who gave the U.S. detailed information on Iraqi forces, including a CD-ROM containing the personnel files of the Iraq Special Security Organization (SSO).

Woodward writes that the CIA essentially became an advocate for war first by asserting that covert action would be ineffective, and later by saying that its new network of spies would be endangered if the United States did not attack Iraq. Another factor in the gathering momentum were the forces the military began shifting to Kuwait, the pre-positioning that was a key component of Franks's planning.

In the summer of 2002, Bush approved $700 million worth of "preparatory tasks" in the Persian Gulf region such as upgrading airfields, bases, fuel pipelines and munitions storage depots to accommodate a massive U.S. troop deployment. The Bush administration funded the projects from a supplemental appropriations bill for the war in Afghanistan and old appropriations, keeping Congress unaware of the reprogramming of money and the eventual cost.

During that summer, Powell and Cheney engaged in some of their sharpest debates. Powell argued that the United States should take its case to the United Nations, which Cheney said was a waste of time. Woodward had described some of that conflict in "Bush at War."

Among Powell's allies was Brent Scowcroft, national security adviser to Bush's father, who wrote an op-ed piece against the war for the Wall Street Journal. After it was published in August 2002, Powell thanked Scowcroft for giving him "some running room." But Rice called Scowcroft to tell her former boss that it looked as if he was speaking for Bush's father and that the article was a slap at the incumbent president.

Despite Powell's admonitions to the president, "Plan of Attack" suggests it was Blair who may have played a more critical role in persuading Bush to seek a resolution from the United Nations. At a meeting with the president at Camp David in early September, Blair backed Bush on Iraq but said he needed to show he had tried U.N. diplomacy. Bush agreed, and later referred to the Camp David session with Blair as "the *cojones* meeting," using a colloquial Spanish term for courage.

After the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution authorizing the resumption of weapons inspections in Iraq, Bush became increasingly impatient with their effectiveness and the role of chief weapons inspector Hans Blix. Shortly after New Year's 2003, he told Rice at his Texas ranch: "We're not winning. Time is not on our side here. Probably going to have to, we're going to have to go to war."

Bush said much the same thing to White House political adviser Karl Rove, who had gone to Crawford to brief him on plans for his reelection campaign. In the next 10 days, Bush also made his decision known to Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell and the Saudi ambassador, Prince Bandar bin Sultan. Bandar, who helped arrange Saudi cooperation with the U.S. military, feared Saudi interests would be damaged if Bush did not follow through on attacking Hussein, and became another advocate for war.

According to "Plan of Attack," Bush asked Rice and his longtime communications adviser, Karen Hughes, whether he should attack Iraq, but he did not specifically ask Powell or Rumsfeld. "I could tell what they thought," the president said. "I didn't need to ask their opinion about Saddam Hussein or how to deal with Saddam Hussein. If you were sitting where I sit, you could be pretty clear."

Rumsfeld, whom Woodward interviewed for three hours, is portrayed in the book as a "defense technocrat" intimately involved with details of the war planning but not focused on the need to attack Iraq in the same way that Cheney and some of Rumsfeld's subordinates such as Wolfowitz and Feith were.

Bush told Powell of his decision in a brief meeting in the White House. Evidently concerned about Powell's reaction, he said, "Are you with me on this? I think I have to do this. I want you with me."

"I'll do the best I can," Powell answered. "Yes, sir, I will support you. I'm with you, Mr. President."

Bush said he did not remember asking the question of his father, former president George H.W. Bush, who fought Iraq in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. But, he added that the two had discussed developments in Iraq.

"You know he is the wrong father to appeal to in terms of strength. There is a higher father that I appeal to," Bush said.

Describing what the 41st president said to him about Iraq, the 43rd president told

Woodward:

"It was less 'Here's how you have to take care of the guy [Hussein]' and more 'I've been through what you've been through and I know what's happening and therefore I love you' would be a more accurate way to describe it."

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