

FT.com site : World Bank affair 'sign of US impunity'.

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752 words
18 May 2007
Financial Times (FT.Com)
English
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The controversial nature of Paul Wolfowitz's tenure at the World Bank can be traced to a culture of impunity and US exceptionalism that has characterised the Bush administration and dominated the direction of its foreign policy, according to academics and former officials.

Critics agreed with the verdict of the World Bank special panel - set up to investigate the circumstances surrounding the pay rise and secondment to the State Department of Mr Wolfowitz's girlfriend at the bank - that he had "from the outset cast himself in opposition to the established rules of the institution".

While a minor affair in itself, they said the violations of ethics rules at the bank reflected the willingness of leading Bush administration figures to set aside established rules and procedures - ranging from the Geneva conventions in dealing with prisoners, to carrying out extraordinary renditions and tolerating torture, to electronic eavesdropping.

"They came into office with an assurance that they were right. Their style was not one of listening to alternative arguments," commented Joseph Nye, Harvard University professor.

Mr Wolfowitz was known for ignoring the advice of those around him while deputy defence secretary in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

"Wolfowitz was always dogmatic, sure of his own position," Mr Nye said, recalling Mr Wolfowitz's dismissal of General Eric Shinseki's estimate that several hundred thousand troops would be required to secure Iraq as "wildly off the mark".

Mr Wolfowitz also told Congress, contrary to the advice of oil industry experts, that Iraq would "relatively soon" finance its own reconstruction.

"That style of dogmatic self-assurance typified the administration and hurt them in foreign affairs and in terms of the domestic management of government," Mr Nye said, noting that this led to an absence of "early warning systems that got them into trouble".

Janine Wedel, a professor at George Mason University's school of public policy, says the Bush administration fast earned the reputation of trampling over the rules.

"Wolfowitz, with the neoconservative ethos that American power can reshape the world, is part of this culture. The idea is that our values and our needs and our demands trump everyone else's, that we can do what we want because we are Americans," she said.

"Wolfowitz is part of the neoconservative core, with a long record of trying to privatise US foreign policy to carry through its agenda," commented Ms Wedel, who is writing a book on the "shadow elite" of the networked neoconservatives. "This group often runs rough-shod over established standards and practices."

The perception of eroding US legitimacy in the world is becoming a key campaign issue for Democrats in the build-up to the 2008 presidential election.

Wesley Clark, retired general and former Nato commander who ran unsuccessfully for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination, has called for accountability and justice over abuses carried out in the Iraq war, noting that only low-level soldiers had been found guilty.

He said President George W. Bush had not been the first to "trim around the edges of international law". But in his conduct of the invasion of Iraq and the treatment of detainees "this time we have gone too far".

"We violated virtually every principle of just war doctrine," Mr Clark said in a speech to John Hopkins University this week in which he called for a full inquiry into the abuse of detainees and how the Geneva conventions were rejected as an "anachronism".

A World Bank insider, who asked not to be identified, agreed that the "climate of fear", which he said the US had cultivated in the World Bank reflected the way it conducted its foreign relations. "These people think purely in terms of power," he said.

However, he also argued that part of the problem was Europe's weakness in asserting itself. The US was still in a position to impose its candidate on the World Bank and this was likely not to change with Mr Wolfowitz's departure, he said.

John Brown, a former US diplomat who resigned in protest at the Iraq war and now teaches public diplomacy, thought the Wolfowitz affair was "more about manners than morality".

"He just behaved so badly and so rudely," Mr Brown said. "A pattern of this administration's diplomacy has been a lack of manners in official settings-. They pride themselves on their rudeness. It's making this administration a laughing-stock overseas."

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