

“A temporary coup”

Author Thomas Powers says the White House's corruption of intelligence has caused the greatest foreign policy catastrophe in modern U.S. history—and sparked a civil war with the nation's intel agencies.

By Mark Follman

The U.S. is now waging three wars, says intelligence expert Thomas Powers. One is in Iraq. The second is in Afghanistan. And the third is in Washington—an all-out war between the White House and the nation's own intelligence agencies.

Powers, the author of “Intelligence Wars: American Secret History From Hitler to Al Qaeda,” charges that the Bush administration is responsible for what is perhaps the greatest disaster in the history of U.S. intelligence. From failing to anticipate 9/11 to pressuring the CIA to produce bogus justifications for war, from abusing Iraqi prisoners to misrepresenting the nature of Iraqi insurgents, the Bush White House, the Pentagon and the intelligence agencies they corrupted, coerced or ignored have made extraordinarily grave errors which could threaten our national security for years. By manipulating intelligence and punishing dissent while pursuing an extreme foreign-policy agenda, Bush leaders have set spy against U.S. spy and deeply damaged America's intelligence capabilities.

“It's a catastrophe beyond belief. Going into Afghanistan was inevitable, and in my opinion the right thing to do. But everything since then has been a horrible mistake,” Powers says. “The CIA is politicized to an extreme. It's under the control of the White House. Tenet is leaving in the middle of an unresolved political crisis—what really amounts to a constitutional crisis.”

The bitterest dispute, though not the only one, is between the CIA and the Pentagon, whose own secret intelligence unit, the Office of Special Plans, aggressively promoted the war on Iraq. While departing CIA Director George Tenet played along with the Bush administration—a fact which Powers says reveals the urgent need for a truly independent intelligence chief—much of the agency is enraged at the Pentagon, which put intense pressure on it to produce reports tailored to the policy goals of the Bush White House. The simmering tensions between the Pentagon, with its troika of Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and Feith, and rank and file CIA personnel boiled over in July 2003, when the White House trashed the career of veteran CIA operative Valerie Plame by leaking her identity. The move was a crude retaliation against Plame's husband, former U.S. ambassador Joseph Wilson, who had exposed the Bush administration's specious claim that Saddam had sought “yellowcake” from Africa to build a nuclear bomb.

The struggle between the CIA and the Defense Department reached a bizarre climax a few weeks ago when Ahmed Chalabi's office was very publicly ransacked by officers working under the command of the CIA; the Iraqi exile leader was later accused of leaking vital information to Iran, among other allegations. The abrupt fall from grace of the man hand-picked by neoconservative policymakers to lead post-Saddam Iraq, says Powers, lays bare the brutal turf war between the two sides.

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The collapse of U.S. intelligence and the arrogance and extremism at the top of the Bush administration are also at the root of the torture scandal at Abu Ghraib prison, Powers says. With U.S. troops facing a mounting insurgency from an enemy they couldn't find, Powers believes Bush officials signed off on a systematic policy of hardcore interrogation in a frantic attempt to deal with the problem. He says that while it's unlikely

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld gave specific orders as to what type of abuse should be meted out to the Iraqi prisoners, there is strong reason to believe Rumsfeld “issued blanket permission for them to turn up the heat.”

In an explosive conjecture, Powers also speculates that the Israelis, “who’ve had the most experience,” cooperated with the U.S. on the techniques used to humiliate and break Arabs, including sexual degradation.

As for the dubiously timed Tenet resignation—with its fairy-tale like cover story of “I’ll be spending more time with my family”—Powers thinks one possibility is that the CIA director may have been forced out after Pentagon officials, enraged by the Chalabi debacle, pressured Bush to get rid of him.

But what troubles Powers the most, he says, is that the Bush administration completely subverted American democracy, browbeating Congress and the national security agencies to launch a war. “They correctly read how the various institutions of our government could be used to stage a kind of temporary coup on a single issue: Whether or not to go to war with Iraq.”

Salon reached Powers by phone at his office in Vermont.

Q: Let’s start with the problems inside Iraq itself. We know there was a dearth of intelligence assets on the ground for years before the war. What’s your assessment of the situation now?

This is one of the most closely guarded secrets of the agency, and I don’t know anybody outside of it who really has a sense of the assets they had inside the country then, or what they have there now. But I don’t think that was the biggest problem.

The biggest problem has to do with the decision at very high levels to look at things in a certain way. There was no shortage of warnings in the U.S. government from various branches and offices that the postwar period was going to be complicated and difficult. In that respect there was no failure of intelligence. But for institutional reasons—political reasons—the White House and the Defense Department didn’t want to hear it. The Defense Department was very explicit that they weren’t going to pay attention to those studies, that they wouldn’t seriously consider increasing their estimate of how much money and troops would be required—because once that went down on a piece of paper Congress would want to see it.

Q: There is already ample evidence that the abusive treatment of Iraqi prisoners proceeded from systematic policy at some level. With U.S. forces facing a rising insurgency and a severe lack of intelligence infrastructure there, do you think Bush policymakers decided that the situation required a kind of dragnet interrogation system? That in order to deal with the problem they had to round up anybody remotely suspicious and “take the gloves off”—as Rumsfeld ordered done with American Taliban John Walker Lindh—in order to figure out who and where the enemy was?

Well, we know Gen. [Geoffrey D.] Miller went from Guantánamo to Iraq [last August] in order to beef up the whole intelligence gathering apparatus so that we could try to begin to understand who we were fighting there. For a long time the administration had been claiming we were fighting Baathists and dead-enders, or foreign terrorists pouring in across Iraq’s borders. Part of the reason for those claims was that politically that’s what was needed to explain the continuing resistance. It was also clear that we didn’t really know who we were fighting.

Fallujah is a good example: The administration has never given a clear answer as to who we’ve been fighting there. Our behavior suggests that when we finally decided to back off, we had concluded that whoever it was didn’t pose a direct threat to us. It was a resistance to us—but we were perfectly prepared to live with it. We turned it over to an Iraqi officer and said, “Hey, you deal with this.” They didn’t have to shoot all the Iraqi insurgents, they reached an agreement and the fighting appeared suddenly to just stop.

Q: How would you connect that to the administration's broader interrogation policy?

I think the attempts at Abu Ghraib—and in many other places, I'm sure—to extract information about what was happening on the ground were based on a real need. But the military had at least one success that suggested how they might do it correctly: tracking down Saddam Hussein. As far as I understand it, that was essentially a bookkeeping success. They really paid attention to detail, kept very good files and eventually identified and located everybody who was connected to Saddam, to 10 degrees of separation. They realized that somebody would tell somebody else in that network where he was. So that kind of complete encompassing of the subject appears to have been effective.

But the notion that Abu Ghraib prison was chaotic and out of control, that's what people say who don't want to take responsibility for it. I don't believe that for a second. Rumsfeld wouldn't sit down and say, "The best way is to photograph these guys pretending to masturbate," but I think he did create the circumstances and the pressure for that kind of thing—in effect issued blanket permission for them to turn up the heat.

Then you have to ask who actually instructed U.S. interrogators in Arab psychology and suggested this would be a good way to get Arabs to feel powerless and vulnerable and tell you what you want to know. My guess is the people who've had the most experience in that, namely the Israelis, who've been at war with Arabs for decades, must've cooperated with us on a method. Of course, that's pure speculation on my part.

Q: Clearly this kind of treatment shatters the U.S. relationship to the Geneva Accords, not to mention the professed morality of our mission. What do you make of the latest Pentagon memo to come to light, which said the president could ignore the anti-torture laws?

The answer seems pretty clear to me. The U.S. government has people who specialize in interrogation, and they have a long list of things they can't do. But when you're feeling desperate, you simply take some of the things from list B, what you're not allowed to do, and you move them over to list A, the things you are allowed to do.

Q: What do you make of the Byzantine twists of the Ahmed Chalabi story? By the time photos of his ransacked Baghdad compound filled the newspapers, the tale of his rise and fall seemed almost unbelievable, the stuff of a spy novel.

I think it reveals an extraordinary level of bitter combat between the CIA and the Pentagon. It's astonishing that things would get to such a level, where the CIA actually oversaw a team of people who broke into Chalabi's headquarters—which was *paid for* by the Pentagon—and ransacked the place and carried away his computers. Who do you think bought those computers? Those are your American tax dollars at work.

That level of internal animosity is amazing. Look at the chronology: First you have a moment when the Pentagon announces that it's cutting off the funds to Chalabi's intelligence operation. A few days later this raid takes place. Well, it looks pretty clear that somebody warned the Pentagon this was going to happen, so that they could at least cut off his funding and not be caught with their pants down. Chalabi was the Pentagon's candidate to run Iraq. Richard Perle [the influential neoconservative advisor to the Pentagon] still says that the single greatest mistake we've made so far was not putting Chalabi in power as soon we got there.

And who has actually gone into power now? The CIA's man: Iyad Allawi [the interim Iraqi prime minister]. That's a dramatic shift. As it was, Chalabi didn't appear to be the candidate that [U.N. envoy] Lakhdar Brahimi was going to choose, but that invasion of Chalabi's office made it an impossibility. The CIA single-handedly destroyed him by doing that.

Q: Chalabi is clearly a shady figure, but given the timing and chronology here, do you find the recent charges that he could be working for the Iranians believable? Or is it ultimately a smear campaign? What's at the center of all this?

Who knows! [Laughs]. We can only try to follow the logic of where the information about the leaked Iranian code would've come from. The conversation between Chalabi and the Iranian intelligence office was likely collected by the National Security Agency, which is normally in charge of that kind of data, who would've then passed it on to counterintelligence in the CIA. Or, the CIA might have actually sent a team into Chalabi's office to plant bugs or broadcasting devices, they might have conducted that type of black-bag operation in order to get access to that communication traffic. It's also conceivable the [Pentagon's] Defense Intelligence Agency was involved.

The information about Chalabi could certainly be real, but meanwhile, the CIA's guy Allawi apparently benefits by the removal from the scene of a principle rival—right before Brahimi gets to choose the new government.

Q: So this is ultimately the CIA fighting back against the Pentagon?

I think so—can it really be a coincidence that this happens right before Brahimi announces the new government? U.S. intelligence knew about the compromised Iranian code about six weeks before the raid. So why wait till just before Brahimi's announcement? And why the large team of people and the very public display of trashing Chalabi headquarters and carting everything away? Regardless of the truth, when something like this happens, Brahimi is incapable of sorting it out. He just has to step away. It's one of those things you can't touch with a 10-foot pole.

I don't know exactly what it all represents, but I'm certain that it involves bad blood between the CIA and the Pentagon. It puzzled me at first why Tenet would be resigning after this apparent CIA triumph. I did wonder if the Pentagon had mustered enough high-level fury to reach the president.

Q: How else do you view Tenet's resignation? The innocuous framing of it accompanies perhaps the biggest series of intelligence disasters in U.S. history.

There is no question that over the last couple of years it's become clear that the various U.S. intelligence agencies have numerous weaknesses and institutional deficiencies. But the biggest problem is really the politicization of intelligence under Bush. It's happened in two ways. First, because of the politics surrounding 9/11, the intelligence agencies have not been able to speak about it honestly and directly. Iraq is the other big issue: The intelligence agencies have not been able to speak about that honestly and directly either, because they've been pressured by the White House, especially before the war, to take a certain view.

That's where all this internal trouble with the intelligence system comes from. It's not as if they're all Keystone Kops who can't figure out where their left shoes are. It's all about the politics of it.

Q: And that's only further complicated by the long history of turf wars between the agencies, between the FBI and CIA, and now apparently between the State Department and the Pentagon intelligence operations.

Exactly, and now they're all fighting over a policy which represents perhaps the single most aggressive and resolute endeavor in the history of U.S. foreign relations. It's astonishing, not just that President Bush got a bee in his bonnet that he had to invade another country and establish a major new American military presence in the Middle East, but that he would do it in this way.

Q: Do you think Tenet essentially was pushed out by the White House?

Tenet was pushed out by the accumulating circumstances, not because he failed to do what Bush wanted him to do, which was essentially two things: The first was to not speak too clearly about the warnings that he'd given the White House before 9/11. You can be certain that it was not easy for Tenet to do that. Tenet has never spoken out

clearly and said, “I told the president everything he needed to know to at least start responding to the threat.”

Secondly, Tenet hasn’t spoken clearly on the reason why they got Iraqi WMD wrong. And it’s not because people in the bowels of the agency had it all balled up, it’s because in the process of writing finished intelligence—which was required to extract a vote for war from congress—it got turned on its head at the upper levels of the CIA. They found certainty where there wasn’t any; the evidence for WMD stockpiles and programs was extremely thin. Who else could have created this situation besides the policymakers themselves?

Q: What about the timing of Tenet’s departure? It comes in tandem with more alerts about terrorist attacks this summer, and right around the June 30 transition of power in Iraq. Do you think Tenet was explicitly asked to leave?

I think he was definitely asked to leave. He showed every sign of extreme distress.

Q: And there’s been plenty of speculation that has to do with the forthcoming congressional reports on 9/11 and Iraq intelligence, which won’t look good for him.

The obvious answer is probably the correct one. Tenet would spend all his time defending himself against the reports. Everybody knows that another guy could run the agency just as well and could run it the same way. Bush has even made sure it’ll be run the same way by keeping the same leadership, with [Deputy Director] John McLaughlin taking over. Bush would end up spending a lot of political capital fighting for Tenet; it’s much simpler just to get him off the stage—just like they did with Gen. Ricardo Sanchez in Iraq. Once somebody made clear that Sanchez knew about Abu Ghraib, they didn’t argue about it. They got rid of him.

Q: What does Tenet’s departure say about the state of the agency at a critical time for U.S. national security operations?

The agency is politicized to an extreme. It is under the control of the Bush White House. Tenet is leaving in the middle of an unresolved political crisis—what really amounts to a constitutional crisis. It’s somewhat like Iran-Contra, though on a totally different scale. The president wanted to go to war. He’s supposed to have the support of the Congress. How did he get it? Well, his administration made up a scary story about imminent dangers.

Q: Doesn’t Tenet’s departure make him the fall guy implicitly, even if President Bush delivered him cordially?

Of course the implicit blame is there, and that’s one of the reasons why he looked and sounded so distressed. He had plenty reason to be; there was a cumulative insistence that the CIA had to be at fault. He could change that picture dramatically by standing up and saying, “Look, you want to know what I really told the president before 9/11? Here it is.” Obviously that would be quite a bombshell and you can be sure the president would never speak to him again.

I think the truth about what happened at the policy level will eventually come out. We know, because it was on paper, that on Aug. 6, 2001 the CIA gave the president a very explicit warning. When 9/11 actually occurred, you would expect to look back and see, once the distress light was on, various U.S. intelligence and police organizations scurrying around frantically responding to the warning. But what do you find? Nothing.

Q: While Tenet appears to have equivocated about Iraqi WMD in some instances, we also know that the CIA expressed significant doubt about specific intelligence on Iraq long before the war—the bogus Niger-uranium report, for example—that the Bush administration still used to make its case. How can the administration possibly continue to promote the idea that the CIA got it all wrong?

Well, who else is the administration going to blame? If they don't say that, then they would have to ask, "Why did the CIA write a report that went in certitude beyond the evidence?" The answer is very likely to be, "Because that's what the president wanted, and he made sure that was understood."

Q: Is the war inside the u.s. intelligence system completely off the charts historically? Is there any precedent for this?

I can't think of any. It's not uncommon for the various secret branches of the U.S. government to be at odds with each other. The CIA quarreled with the Defense Department for years over Soviet missiles, but I don't remember anything like this. The CIA was present when that team of Iraqi police went in and ransacked Chalabi's compound. I mean, that's amazing. The only thing that would've made it more amazing was if it had happened in Washington.

In a way it reminds me of the "Night of the long knives" in 1934, the night when Hitler got rid of the Brown Shirts, the street fighting organization that had helped the Nazi Party come to power. It was a highly organized institution bitterly hated by the army. It was run by a bunch of people who were politically ambitious and were direct rivals of the group that came into power with Hitler. Literally in one night the offices and headquarters of this group were raided and many of them were killed in their beds. Immediately all kinds of propaganda came out about their low behavior and betrayal. It was an internal government bloodletting where one faction just simply swept the other off the scene.

What the CIA did to Chalabi isn't exactly the same, but it makes me worry even more about the level of covert fighting inside our own government.

Q: Just last week the New York Times reported that the CIA is still struggling with a "major flaw" in its operations. A senior agency official, Jami Miscik, described conditions still ripe for the distortion of information, and similar problems reportedly plague the Defense Intelligence Agency. What's your view of the rising chorus within Congress to overhaul the intelligence system?

I think it's a good idea, and I never thought that before. It ought to be set up with a devoted Cabinet post, a secretary of intelligence who would have a wide range of powers and authority to oversee the whole system. But that person can't run everything; each of the agencies is distinct for good reasons, and each one has to be run by its own chief.

Separating intelligence and police operations is absolutely essential. If you put it all under a single authority it would represent the greatest threat by far to American democracy. Other countries have proven that. A single intelligence organization will abuse the power of secrecy to protect itself—all intelligence organizations *routinely* abuse the power of secrecy to protect themselves.

Just look back at the way we got into this war: There was nobody in the public who had the capacity to seriously question the CIA's evidence and arguments. We just had to take it on trust.

Q: And that's a dangerous prospect when you have a White House with an inflexible agenda that's in control of the system.

I think so. I don't know how else to explain getting it completely wrong. If you go back and look at Powell's speech at the U.N., he makes dozens of claims and not one of them was ever robustly confirmed—in fact, almost all of them were completely false. I mean, how could he get it that wrong?

The most important thing to do now is to alter the chain of command. I think it makes sense to have the secretary of intelligence serve for a four-year term that overlaps presidential terms, an appointment that begins at the end of the first year of every presidential term. In other words, each president coming into office inherits the previous

intelligence leader for at least a year. That provides continuity and avoids election year politics.

Q: How do you view the Bush administration in terms of dealing with this whole series of intelligence problems that have come to light?

It's a catastrophe beyond belief. Going into Afghanistan was inevitable, and in my opinion the right thing to do. But everything since then has been a horrible mistake, one that has made it more difficult to fight the war on terror, has driven away allies and diminished the degree of cooperation from a number of intelligence services and governments in the Arab world. And it promises to get worse. This was a completely unnecessary, distracting, expensive war that has isolated the United States.

Q: It seems like there has almost never been direct acknowledgement by the White House of any policy problems.

Yes, but they've done something else which troubles me more than anything. They correctly read how the various institutions of our government could be used to stage a kind of temporary coup on a single issue: Whether or not to go to war with Iraq.

President Bush used the intelligence system as a blunt instrument, and they forced Congress to go along—the Congress was in an almost impossible position. When the president uses the maximum power of his own office and says, "I am soberly telling you that this is necessary for the safety of the country," you gotta listen to the guy. At least once.