

Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House

Peter Baker. (Doubleday, 2013), 816 pp., index.

Reviewed by Thomas Coffey

Days of Fire is more a breezy and well-written walk down memory lane than an original take on the George W. Bush presidency. The narrative is skin deep, and the book comes across at times as handy crib notes on the Bush, Cheney, Rice, Rumsfeld, and Rove memoirs. Peter Baker, chief White House correspondent for the *New York Times*, talked with many former officials, but these interviews only underscore how little new there is to say. The Bush administration has been an open secret since the Bob Woodward books gave readers an inside look.^a Except for the new and absorbing treatment of the differences between Bush and Cheney about a pardon for Cheney's aide Scooter Libby, the book is surprisingly short on interactions between the two men. But there is something to be said about retelling an important story, especially when it comes to the president and vice president's interactions with the national security team and the Intelligence Community.

The book starts by rebutting the commonplace impression that Vice President Cheney was the real power behind the Oval Office. Baker underscores that President Bush was very much his own man and that Cheney was an unequal and silent partner giving counsel. Bush controlled meetings of the National Security Council and briefings with intelligence officers. The circumstances surrounding one of these briefings regarding the August 2001 PDB item, "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in US," is suitably raised. The same cannot be said about the book's treatment of the voluminous threat reporting passed on to the White House every morning after the 9/11 attack. The author quotes Cheney's description of the threat matrix as a "cover-your-ass kind of bureaucratic procedure." This recognition did not stop the seemingly incessant reporting from giving the impression the nation was under siege. National Security Advisor Condoleez-

za Rice said the reporting "had a huge impact on our psyches."

On the controversial decision to invade Iraq, the book points out that policymaker consideration of that move started well before intelligence became a major factor in the decision. Baker quotes the president's speaking of "taking Saddam out" before 9/11, and he notes Bush asked Rumsfeld to develop a plan for an invasion in late September 2001. CIA and Intelligence Community officers walked into a highly-charged policy atmosphere—hardly a first for intelligence—when they were asked to assess the relationship between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda and for specifics of WMD stockpiling and production.

At the same time, Baker regurgitates the worn line suggesting there was something insidious about high-level White House interaction with the CIA about intelligence on Iraq's WMD and its relationship with Al Qaeda. After noting investigations found no evidence that Cheney had applied pressure during his many visits to CIA headquarters for Iraq briefings, Baker goes on to quote an unnamed CIA officer saying, "analysts felt more politicized and pushed than any of them could remember." The author would have been better off sticking with insights from Deputy Director John McLaughlin and Associate Deputy Director for Operations Michael Sulick, which suggested the White House had encouraged, intentionally or not, confirmation bias in CIA officers and that analysts were instructed to give firmer, more sweeping judgments, possibly in response to not connecting the dots prior to 9/11.

The visit of Director Tenet and DDCI John McLaughlin to the White House in late December 2002 to brief the president and vice president on Iraq gets blurrier with each retelling. Was it an intelligence briefing to assess the state of the case against Saddam Hussein? Or was that matter settled and the meeting more about convincing the public the Iraq leader possessed WMD? Tenet saw

a. *Bush at War* (Simon & Schuster, 2002); *Plan of Attack: Bush at War, Part II* (2004); *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III* (2006).

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the briefing as the latter, helping to explain the bravado behind his “slam dunk” assurance the argument could be strengthened. Baker views the distinction as a subtle one.

The book is a constant reminder of the difficulties that arise when intelligence is used to advocate a major government policy, whether it is a speech in Cincinnati, an interview on *Meet the Press*, or a UN presentation. The more integral intelligence on Iraq became to Bush administration policy formulation and outreach, the more CIA officers risked giving tacit approval to the implications of their support. When they stepped back, however, policy officials sometimes mischaracterized the intelligence. Calling them on it created its own set of problems. This all seemed to come to a head when Secretary of State Powell did what the occasion demanded during his UN presentation: he made a case for action against Saddam through clear and powerful language describing the intelligence. Baker tells us Powell had Tenet sit behind him to demonstrate CIA’s endorsement of the evidence.

The truth, of course, is more complicated. Analysts and spies working the issue operated under a compelling backdrop: Saddam Hussein had WMD; he did not account for their destruction; therefore, he must still have WMD. That alone was quite an indictment. The Iraqis also appeared to be giving UN inspectors the runaround. By adding the possibility of deception to the equation, the Iraqis had placed on themselves the burden of proof to show Iraq did *not* have weapons. The CIA arms inspector David Kay may have captured it best when he blamed the wrong analysis not on politicization but on the Iraqis, who acted guilty—as though they had weapons.

Although Baker mentions David Kay’s insights, *Days of Fire* reads like a book in a hurry, with little time to dig deeper or reflect on events. So it falls to the telling quote to jar the reader: “Are you going to take care of this guy or not,” an impatient Cheney asks the president about toppling Saddam by military force. “We’ll see who is right,” Bush defiantly tells the CIA briefer passing on the agency’s pessimism about Iraq’s first national elections. “It sounded like amateur hour at the CIA,” Cheney concludes upon learning Tenet was not told about a CIA-sponsored mission to Niger to inquire about Iraqi purchases of uranium. The aftermath of the Niger mission—including a special prosecutor investigation into whether the administration purposely blew a CIA officer’s cover—provides the book’s most striking quote. Upon learning his chief of staff would not be pardoned after being found guilty of

perjury, Cheney takes the president to task for “leaving a good man wounded on the field of battle.”

The two men were waging “War on Terror,” after all. Together they remade the CIA and military into organizations fixated on targeting—the capturing or killing of terrorists—and fighting weapons proliferation. But whereas Cheney wanted to continue fighting the war in an aggressive way, Baker tells us Bush by his second term wanted to rely more on diplomacy and the promotion of democracy. They were already growing apart as Bush learned from experience and needed less of Cheney’s veteran advice. And now their policy differences were on display in front of the national security team. The book’s account of how Cheney was the lone voice supporting a US bombing raid on a nuclear power reactor in Syria drove home how much things had changed. Instead of the usual talk behind closed doors, Bush called out Cheney to get his isolated view for all to see.

It had changed for intelligence officers, as well. No longer would a measured brief on such an issue—high confidence the facility is a nuclear reactor, low confidence it is part of a weapons program—be overlooked. Bush refused to authorize a strike given the latter judgment, even though Director Michael Hayden recounts telling the president that, despite the lack of evidence, he found it hard to imagine that the plant was part of anything else. IC comfort with uncertainty may have gone overboard with the 2007 Iran NIE. While the 2002 estimate on Iraq WMD was misleading in its certainty, the Iran NIE was misleading in its ambiguity. Downplaying the key issue of uranium enrichment, the estimate focused on how the weaponization program was halted in 2003, but the analysts were only “moderately confident” it had not been restarted. The drafters also stressed they did not know whether Iran intended to develop nuclear weapons. National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley is quoted as calling the estimate a “disaster” for garnering international support for tougher sanctions.

The Iran NIE’s summary is one of the relatively few documentary sources in *Days of Fire*. And now that most former officials have had their say about the Bush presidency, it turns to the George W. Bush Presidential Library—where the two men made their only post-administration appearance together—to give a richer, more documented take on the relationship.

