

JAKE SIEWERT: Welcome to Talks at GS. I'm Jake Siewert, Global Head of Corporate Communications here at Goldman. And I'm delighted today to be joined by Robert Draper. Robert is a writer at large for *The New York Times* magazine and a contributing writer for *National Geographic* magazine. His latest book is called *To Start a War: How the Bush Administration Took America into Iraq*. Robert, thanks for joining us today.

ROBERT DRAPER: My pleasure, Jake. Thanks for having me around.

JAKE SIEWERT: What made you decide to write it? Why did you embark on this project? A ton of work. And what gap do you hope to fill?

ROBERT DRAPER: Well, because Jake, for all the time that I had spent with President Bush during his second term, and for that matter with so many of his White House advisors, I, and frankly I think, other authors, distinguished as they are and as great as the work that they accomplished was, hadn't cracked the mystery, the legacy defining mystery. Why did he do it? Why did 18 months after we were attacked on 9/11 did the president go war, declare war against a country that had nothing to do with those attacks?

And there were these ancillary questions too, which is that did the intelligence guide him? Would better intelligence have made any difference at all? And then for that matter, could anyone have talked him out of it?

These were baseline questions that I didn't feel had been sufficiently addressed. And you know, given that the consequences still linger, not just that fateful decision, I think, resulted in Obama's presidency, which in turn resulted in Trump's presidency. But it also has created a kind of credibility chasm, not even just a gap, where so many Americans believe that the government is not on the level. I think all of that is a legacy of Iraq. And thus, you know, warranted a return to it, a revisitation of the facts. And we can talk about this later, frankly, the question is if we agree that a decision such as this, that cost so many lives and so much calamity in the Middle East and in our politics today, what, if anything, we learned from it? And that, to me, is a ghost that hangs over the whole narrative as well.

JAKE SIEWERT: One of the main characters, you start the book and end the book with him, and I learned a lot about him reading it - I thought I knew a lot, but I learned a lot more - was Paul

Wolfowitz. And might not ring a bell to some of our younger views at Goldman, certainly. But he was in the headlines all the time during the Bush years. Why was he such a key figure in the decision making leading up to the war?

ROBERT DRAPER: It's a good question, Jake, and a natural question because Wolfowitz wasn't an unimportant person. He was the Deputy Secretary of Defense. So, hierarchically there he was. And he was in a lot of meetings and all that.

But Wolfowitz really is instrumental to this particular narrative because he is the one, more than anyone else, who lent animation and intellectual ballast to the idea of attacking Iraq. An idea that gained hold right after 9/11, despite the fact that the perpetrators were not Iraqis. And this literally was the case, as my book discloses for the first time, on the evening on September 11th when Wolfowitz sent out a tasking to the Defense Intelligence Agency that said, "Give me everything you've got about Saddam's ties to terror groups." So it was on his right arm and within a matter of days, literally four days, he put it on the president's radar as well, the notion of attacking Saddam Hussein. We didn't do it right then, obviously. 18 months passed before we did. But there it was. There it stayed. And I think that a lot of us at the time were not aware of the contributions of Wolfowitz very, very early on. But he was the one who continued to sort of give it the intellectual energy, as well as just the sheer passion that was required to finally make it happen.

JAKE SIEWERT: So, I think there are a lot of liberals who think that the Bush administration was intent upon invading Iraq from the very beginning. But you make pretty clear that 9/11 really changed everything. And up until that point, the policy towards that part of the world pursued by the Bush administration was not all that different from what was done under President Clinton. How did 9/11 reshape President Bush's view, really, of the world and of foreign policy? And why did Iraq leap to the front? It was an obsession for Wolfowitz and others, but it really hadn't been top of mind for him up until that point.

ROBERT DRAPER: Sure. I mean, to back into that, Jake, it's understandable that people would come to the conclusion that Bush had it out for Saddam from the outset, after all, as Bush had said more than once, Saddam had tried to kill his father in a plot in 1993 that failed. Yet, to me the evidence is pretty clear that Bush as a Texas governor with limited foreign policy experience intended his agenda to be a domestic one. Intended it

to be related to tax cuts, immigration, education reform, things of that nature. And did not want to spend his time hugging war widows.

He had expressed to a senior analyst at the CIA that Saddam will one day get his. That it's a matter of when, not if. But there is no evidence to suggest that Bush wanted to be the actor on that. And in fact, on the very morning of September 11th before the attacks occurred, Bush was reading policy papers relating to smart sanctions against Saddam. But policy was contained and there's no evidence to suggest that that would change.

9/11, I think, you know, racialized him. Not even so much for anything that Saddam had done, because after all Saddam didn't do anything. But instead for what had not been done ourselves. For our lack of preparedness for 9/11, made Bush, in a sense, hyper aware of the possibility of the likelihood that there would be another attack. And that it would come from some other foe, or perhaps a foe in confederation with Al Qaeda again. And so, it was this sort of heightened sense of alert born out of not being sufficiently alert to 9/11 that I think is really what catalyzed, or at least sets the stage, let's say, for the decision to invade.

JAKE SIEWERT: The big debate in the White House was sort of memorialized by Bob Woodward in his book where, was it December 21st, 2002, George Tenet came in and said, "Oh, it's a slam dunk," the WMD intel. A lot has been made about that. You talked to Condoleezza Rice specifically about that. What did she tell you about how that mattered to President Bush and how he thought about his decision, and how it should inform how decisions get made by future administrations?

ROBERT DRAPER: I've talked to almost everyone who was in the room for that meeting, and there were quite a few of them. That meeting has been widely misunderstood. And it's not entirely Bob Woodward's fault. But what people have taken away from that meeting was, well, there's a moment where President Bush isn't so sure whether Saddam has weapons, and thus whether we should go to war. And George Tenet, the director of the CIA stands up and holds his arms in the air and says, "Oh, are you kidding? It's a slam dunk, sir." That's not what happened at all.

What happened was that the CIA gave their presentation of what they knew about Saddam's weapons program. And at the end, Bush said, "Wow, is that all you got? I'm not terribly impressed." But this was not Bush saying, "Wow, maybe Saddam doesn't have a

weapons program. Maybe we shouldn't go to war." Quite the opposite. There was a note taker in the room. And I've seen those notes and what those notes say is that the president says, "You know, we've got to do better than this because pretty soon I'm going to have to convince mothers and fathers to feel okay about me sending their daughters and sons off to war. And so we need to make a better case. We should get some people in from Madison Avenue. We should get better lawyers to argue all of this? Do you think that you can do better, George?" And he said, "Slam dunk."

Now, this was all very meaningful to the president. But not in a way that it changed his mind about anything. It was more a question of was the CIA up to the job of selling the war? Not whether there was a reason to go to war. Now, in a way the scenario that I've just described both lets Tenet off the hook and makes him more culpable at the same time. After all, is it really the job of the intelligence community to be selling the war? And yet, that was, basically, what occurred. And I think that what emerged from that then was the CIA doubling down on trying to help be a salesman. And that led to, metastasized you could even say, into Colin Powell's infamous UN presentation that turned out to be full of falsehoods about Saddam's illicit program.

JAKE SIEWERT: So, you obviously spent some time with Colin Powell and his circle. One of the lines that jumped out to me was this line about how he became a general more out of deference than defiance. What role did Powell end up playing in the lead up to the war? And looking back, what role did he wish he played?

ROBERT DRAPER: That's a great question, Jake. I mean, I think it's very easy to malign Powell, precisely and kind of perversely because he was the one who had maximum credibility within the administration. And I think it should always be said, people should always be reminded, that Colin Powell and Colin Powell alone in the administration was the individual who said to the President of the United States, "Things could go wrong. Here's what could happen." It was the Pottery Barn, "You break it, you own it. You own all of these fractious provinces." And he laid that out to the president as best as he could.

But I do think that it's axiomatic of four-star generals that they don't get to where they are by being rebels. They believe in the chain of command. They believe in deference to their superiors. And when the President said in early January of 2003,

"Colin, I think I need to do this. I want you with me. Are you with me?" It was just simply not within Powell to say, "no sir, I'm not."

Now, I do engage in a counterfactual in the book of what if he'd said, "Nah, I can't do this sir. I'm against this and I resign." If he had resigned, his entire senior staff would have resigned. If that had happened, Jack Straw, the foreign minister to Tony Blair would have resigned. Straw told me as much. If that had happened, then it would have been a crisis for Tony Blair. He would have gotten a vote of no confidence, or at the very minimum would not have gotten authorization for war in the Parliament. And Blair would have been fallen out of the equation in the UK as part of our coalition.

Now imagine the media climate. Imagine with all this happening there will be more vigilance in the media. There's, meantime, you've got inspectors going on the ground and finding nothing. It would have changed everything had Colin Powell said no.

But there are a lot of people who could have said no. And Colin Powell does stand alone as the one individual who attempted to speak truth to power.

JAKE SIEWERT: So, talk about a little bit of the legacy of the war. Both President Obama and President Trump ran pretty much against the Iraq War or highlighted their opposition to it and cast themselves as reluctant interventionists. How does the war continue to shape the politics and foreign policies of both the Republican and Democratic Party today?

ROBERT DRAPER: The short answer, Jake, is that it doesn't at all because there is-- and it should be. There are questions that are bagged about the Iraq episode that apply to events such as the NATO strikes of Libya, for example. And yet, though they are reminiscent of each other, they seem to exist on parallel planes. There is a lot of difference between, as foreign policy visions, between the Freedom Agenda of President Bush's second term, of the don't do stupid s--- that describes Obama's foreign policy, to Trump's America First. And there are questions that come up.

Assuming that we do engage in the world, when do we? Should another Rwanda arise during the Biden administration, how should he respond? Should an Arab Spring begin to light a fire, do you simply sit back and say, "No, we've been through messes in the Middle East before. We're not going to do it again." I mean,

this warrants a robust discussion that hasn't taken place, including with President-elect Biden who has said that he regrets his support for Bush. And who, in fact, apologized to the man he had on staff when he was senator who he'd hired as a WMD expert who basically said, "Look, this nuclear argument of the aluminum tubes being used for nuclear centrifuges, it's bogus. Don't buy it." Biden didn't listen to him. And wished that he had. But what lessons has President-elect Biden drawn from this?

Now interestingly and briefly, Jake, I have been told by people in the administration that though Biden was criticized for not immediately jumping on board with the raid of Abbottabad where Bin Laden's shelter was. It's been suggested to me by members of the administration that that was the hesitancy of a sadder, but wiser Vice President Biden who had seen his willingness to embrace whatever the intelligence community was telling him now be questioned. So, it'll be very interesting going forward to see how the president-elect has processed and what lessons he's learned from that debacle.

JAKE SIEWERT: So, looking ahead to the first 100 days of President-elect Biden's administration, given everything that's happened the last couple weeks, couple months, what do you think his priorities will be on the domestic and the foreign policy front as he starts of?

ROBERT DRAPER: Yeah, sure. On the foreign policy side, simply stated, it will be a sort of return to normalcy. That it will be a reappraisal, or a return I should say, to scrutiny of North Korea and Iran, to a degree, that we did not see under this administration. And concomitantly a reassurance of our traditional allies that we are still with them. You know, the frayed relations between us and Germany and Canada were lamentable. And I think Biden will just simply by his very presence, but also just by his chops as a guy who's been in the foreign policy community for a long time, be seen as vastly reassuring to the international community.

On the domestic front, it's really an open question as to what he's going to be able to do. And I suspect that much of what he does will be done by executive order. Sure, the Democrats have a working majority in the Senate as well as a very frail one in the House. But I do not foresee any kind of major first 100 days undertaking in the way that Obama did with the stimulus and began doing with the Affordable Care Act among other initiatives. I do think that there will be an acceleration of

vaccine dissemination. That there will be, perhaps, another round of pandemic stimulus. But the rest of it will be executive orders undoing Trumps deregulation, environmental deregulations and things of that nature. It's going to be a lot of stuff at the margins, in other words.

JAKE SIEWERT: All right. Well, thank you for joining us today. And appreciate the time you took. And appreciate the book.

ROBERT DRAPER: Thanks so much, Jake.

JAKE SIEWERT: Love to have you back with your next project.

ROBERT DRAPER: All right. It's a deal. All right, thanks.

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