

## Bush's Echo Chamber

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**C**olin Powell, who urged the president to think more deeply about the consequences of invading Iraq, is being shoved toward the exit. And Condoleezza Rice, who blithely told America, "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud," is being ushered in to take his place.

Competence has never been highly regarded by the fantasists of the George W. Bush administration. In the Bush circle, no less than in your average youth gang, loyalty is everything. The big difference, of course, is that the administration is far more dangerous than any gang. History will show that the Bush crowd of incompetents brought tremendous amounts of suffering to enormous numbers of people. The amount of blood being shed is sickening, and there is no end to the grief in sight.

Ironically, Ms. Rice was supposed to be the epitome of competence. She was the charming former provost of Stanford University, an expert on Soviet and East European affairs who was also an accomplished pianist, ice skater and tennis player, and the presidential candidate George W. Bush's tutor on foreign policy.

She was superwoman. They didn't come more accomplished.

She and Mr. Bush developed a remarkable bond, and he made her his national security adviser. Which was a problem. Because all the evidence shows she wasn't very good at the job.

Ms. Rice's domain was the filter through which an awful lot of mangled and misshapen intelligence made its way to the president and the American people. She either believed the nonsense she was spouting about mushroom clouds, or she deliberately misled her president and the nation on matters that would eventually lead to the deaths of thousands.

Secretary Powell's close friend and deputy at the State Department, Richard Armitage, viewed Ms. Rice's operation with contempt. In his book "Plan of Attack," Bob Woodward said Mr. Armitage "believed that the foreign-policy-making system that was supposed to be coordinated by Rice was essentially dysfunctional."

In October 2003, the president, frustrated by setbacks in Iraq, put Ms. Rice in charge of his Iraq Stabilization Group, which gave her the responsibility for overseeing the effort to quell the violence and begin the reconstruction in Iraq.

We see from recent headlines how well that has worked out.

A crucial mentor for Ms. Rice was Brent Scowcroft, the national security adviser for the first President Bush. He appointed her to the National Security Council in 1989. Ms. Rice and the nation would have benefited if she had sought out and followed Mr. Scowcroft's counsel on Iraq.

Mr. Scowcroft's view, widely expressed before the war, was that the U.S. should exercise extreme caution. He did not believe the planned invasion was wise or necessary. In an article in The Wall Street Journal in August 2002, he wrote:

"There is scant evidence to tie Saddam to terrorist organizations, and even less to the Sept. 11 attacks. Indeed Saddam's goals have little in common with the terrorists who threaten us, and there is little incentive for him to make common cause with them."

Ms. Rice exhibited as little interest in Mr. Scowcroft's opinion as George W. Bush did in his father's. (When Bob Woodward asked Mr. Bush if he had consulted with the former president about the decision to invade Iraq, he replied, "There is a higher father that I appeal to.")

As I watch the disastrous consequences of the Bush policies unfold - not just in Iraq, but here at home as well - I am struck by the immaturity of this administration, whatever the ages of the officials involved. It's as if the children have taken over and sent the adults packing. The counsel of wiser heads, like George H. W. Bush, or Brent Scowcroft, or Colin Powell, is not needed and not wanted.

Some of the world's most important decisions - often, decisions of life and death - have been left to those who are less competent and less experienced, to men and women who are deficient in such qualities as risk perception and comprehension of future consequences, who are reckless and dangerously susceptible to magical thinking and the ideological pressure of their peers.

I look at the catastrophe in Iraq, the fiscal debacle here at home, the extent to which loyalty trumps competence at the highest levels of government, the absence of a coherent vision of the future for the U.S. and the world, and I wonder, with a sense of deep sadness, where the adults have gone.