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An Interview with Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, Part 1 **by Andy Worthington**

Col. Lawrence Wilkerson served in the U.S. military for 31 years and was chief of staff to Secretary of State Colin Powell from August 2002 until January 2005, two months after Powell's resignation, when he left the State Department. He is now the chairman of the [New America Foundation's US-Cuba 21st Century Policy Initiative](#). In March, in a guest column for the [Washington Note](#), he wrote an article criticizing some crucial aspects of the Bush administration's detention policies in the "war on terror," which, as [I noted at the time](#), "are not as widely known as they should be, and which echo some of the important issues that I've tried to raise in my book [The Guantánamo Files](#) and my subsequent writing."

Specifically, Col. Wilkerson wrote about "the utter incompetence of the battlefield vetting in Afghanistan during the early stages of the U.S. operations there" and how "several in the U.S. leadership became aware of this lack of proper vetting very early on and, thus, of the reality that many of the detainees were innocent of any substantial wrongdoing, had little intelligence value, and should be immediately released." He also poured scorn on "the ad hoc intelligence philosophy that was developed to justify keeping many of these people, called the mosaic philosophy," whose shortcomings were recognized, in May, by a District Court judge, Gladys Kessler, when she granted the habeas corpus petition of a Yemeni prisoner, [Alla Ali Bin Ali Ahmed](#).

I recently approached Col. Wilkerson to ask if he would discuss some of these issues in greater detail, and was delighted when he agreed to be interviewed, as he provided some startling new insights into the conduct of the "war on terror." Specifically, in this first part, he explained how the State Department had wondered whether the little-reported [Dasht-i-Leili container massacre](#) had involved war crimes, how the Bush administration had considered using the Indian Ocean territory of Diego Garcia (leased from the UK) instead of Guantánamo, and how Col. Wilkerson himself believed that some prisoners had been [held on Diego Garcia](#).

He also spoke about the administration's obsession with building a "mosaic" of intelligence from the prisoners to understand the workings of al-Qaeda and how, increasingly,

this obsession shifted to [a search for connections between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein](#), to justify the planned invasion of Iraq. What I found particularly interesting at this point in the interview was Col. Wilkerson's insistence that the administration's fear of another terrorist attack subsided more rapidly than has been previously acknowledged, as the drive for war in Iraq took over.

Col. Wilkerson also spoke about the long-standing rivalry between the Pentagon and the CIA and how Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld — albeit with the backing of [Dick Cheney](#) — infected the military with the kind of techniques authorized for use by the CIA on “high-value detainees,” and he also mentioned receiving reports from military personnel who refused to disobey the Geneva Conventions when it came to the humane treatment of prisoners, and from others who revealed the disturbing scale of the global detention policies implemented by both the Pentagon and the CIA.

Towards the end of this first half of the interview, he also explained how he believed that President Bush had no idea how dysfunctional his administration was, and reinforced his earlier claim that “no more than a dozen or two” of the prisoners held at Guantánamo had “any intelligence of significance” with a few pointed anecdotes about the administration's overall failure to seize more than a handful of worthwhile prisoners.

Andy Worthington: I wanted to talk to you about the article you wrote about Guantánamo for the *Washington Note* in March, which was fascinating because you pointed out so many aspects of how the prison had come into being that had not been reported very well. I know that you received a certain amount of attention for it at the time, but I'm very interested in putting some of those comments that you made out there again, for some people who may have missed them the first time around, and also because I was hoping that maybe you could expand on a few of the themes that you wrote about.

In the first major point that you raised in your article, you talked about the incompetence of the battlefield vetting, and I know, from [The Interrogators](#), a book by a former interrogator in Afghanistan, who wrote under the pseudonym Chris Mackey, that the orders came from Camp Doha in Kuwait, where the prisoner lists were being looked at, that every single Arab who came into U.S. custody had to be sent to Guantánamo, that there was effectively no screening process whatsoever.

And, of course, the Article 5 competent tribunals [didn't take place either](#). (Held close to the time and place of capture and designed to separate combatants from those caught up in the fog of war, these tribunals were established in the Geneva Conventions and were used by the U.S. military in every war from Vietnam onwards — until the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan). So I was wondering how you'd heard about the incompetence, if you'd heard this from military people in the field who'd complained that the competent tribunals didn't take place, whether you'd been

getting feedback from Kandahar and Bagram about how there was no screening. I wonder if you could explain a little bit more about that.

Lawrence Wilkerson: My initial source was immediate, and it was from the conversations that took place every morning without fail, sometimes at the weekend but always Monday through Friday, at 8.30, in the Deputy's Conference Room in the State Department, with the Secretary [Colin Powell] and the Deputy [Richard Armitage] assembled and some 50-odd undersecretaries, assistant secretaries, office directors, etc. We went around the table with everyone with a dog in the fight, which was most of the undersecretaries and the assistants getting his or her three or four minutes, and the Secretary would get his five minutes or 30 minutes, depending on what the issues were that day — and of course the Deputy would get his time too. And immediately upon our commencing operations in Afghanistan — and when I say commencing operations, I mean the moment we had the first Special Operating Force team with the Northern Alliance, and we were getting actual reporting back from U.S. as well as CIA with Northern Alliance Forces (so, from U.S. military sources, CIA sources, and initially from others in-country, let's put it this way, to whom we had access) — what I got immediately was that, with regard to the Northern Alliance taking prisoners, it was absolute chaos.

We got signs that they weren't taking prisoners; that is to say, they were shooting them. We got signs that when they did take prisoners they would negotiate with them, get them to reconcile themselves, so to speak, and let them go. I mean, it was chaos. Everything you can possibly imagine that could be happening on a battlefield in Afghanistan was happening.

Andy Worthington: So this is presumably after [the fall of Kunduz](#) and the fall of the North, when there was the terrible container massacre....

Lawrence Wilkerson: It grew particularly — how shall I say it? The volume [of information] increased remarkably right before, and then during and after [the fall of Mazar-e-Sharif](#).

Andy Worthington: OK. And then most of these people didn't end up in American hands. To my knowledge, only dozens of the thousands of prisoners who made it alive to General Dostum's prison in Sheberghan, near Mazar-e-Sharif were taken to Guantánamo....

Lawrence Wilkerson: Right, and of course that was the subject of an intense period of discussion. If my memory serves, it was over several mornings with different questions from the Secretary and the Deputy Secretary of our war crimes envoy, Pierre Prosper — ambassador-at-large Pierre Prosper — and of other people like Beth Jones, who was assistant secretary for Eurasia. The appropriate functional and/or regional assistant secretaries would join in the discussion in the

morning when the Secretary would ask questions, and I do remember several discussions about these prisoners who grew fairly visible there for a moment and then just seemed to fade from the scene as Dostum apparently had his people put them in containers. One story was that his people then ventilated the containers with AK47s in an attempt to give the prisoners some air, if you want to put a positive spin on it; if you want to put a negative spin on it, in an attempt to kill them. I mean, there are all kinds of stories associated with that, but that was sort of minor considering the chaos that, it seemed to me, existed on the battlefield of Afghanistan with regard to detainee management.

Then it faded for a bit and we didn't get a lot until we began to hear that there were going to be some detainees that were going to be siphoned off, and were going to be brought back to either Diego Garcia or Guantánamo Bay, or some other place that would be essentially out of U.S. jurisdiction, and Guantánamo quickly took the most emphasis, because we had dealings with Guantánamo before, during the '93, '94 exodus of Haitians, when we had problems with immigration across the Florida Strait, and we needed a place to keep people in this instance, so that we could determine, on a very careful, methodical basis, whether they were economic asylum seekers, whether they were political asylum seekers, or whether they were just people trying to get away from wherever they were, and to do the vetting process, and so forth, and to do it out of the confines of the very precisely delineated American judicial procedures.

So Guantánamo was a place that we knew from past, what I would call altruistic uses of it — to allow the process to work, to keep people in a place where they weren't harassed, where they were fed and looked after, and had medical attention and so forth — but it became a place where we were trying to detain people from the so-called “war on terror.”

And the reason for picking that place ultimately — and I still believe we had a few at Diego Garcia, and perhaps a few in other places too, but Guantánamo was the principal place — the motivation for picking it was familiarity, and the fact that we'd been through this before, with this sort of extra-territoriality, this being outside the U.S. court system and so forth, and it had met the test of time, if you will, during those episodes, and so it very quickly became the area of choice, I think, and before we knew it at the State Department we were getting cables saying that people were coming back, detainees were coming back from Afghanistan and coming back to Guantánamo.

We knew that these people probably included people captured in Pakistan, people captured under what was a bounty system, essentially, people captured perhaps in other areas, but we knew that the central flow point was going to be Afghanistan, and we also knew that because we were already getting signals from Foreign Minister Straw, the Foreign Minister in Spain, and different countries, who were alerting us to the fact that they knew that we had some of their citizens in these contingents, and they were making their early pleas to get their citizens repatriated, to get them back, under the guise that, of course, they could do as well determining

their guilt or innocence, putting them through their judicial systems and incarcerating them if necessary.

And I remember Jack Straw being particularly adamant about this because he was one of the first to know, as you might expect, that British citizens were involved, and that went on, almost on a daily basis, to the point where it became exasperating for Powell and to a certain extent for Armitage, who would be there sometimes when Powell was traveling, and we'd ask these questions, with specific detainees in mind, with specific countries in mind, indeed often with specific foreign ministers in mind who had just called the Secretary that morning, and the Secretary or the Deputy would ask Pierre, "What's the update?" and Pierre would, as happened almost every time, roll his eyes and report essentially the same thing: that the Secretary of Defense would not let them go.

We had made every plea, we had banged on doors, we had sent cables, the Secretary himself had called the National Security Advisor, Dr. Rice, the Secretary himself had brought it up with the President of the United States on one occasion, but the Secretary of Defense would not relent, these people were not going to be released. And that went on, and of course the Uighurs got into it, and we started a program to sort of shop the Uighurs around the world, and that went on and, as far as I remember, was never resolved in a way that the Secretary or Pierre was very happy with, and in fact we wound up [placing a few Uighurs in Albania](#), that was the only country that would take them....

Andy Worthington: And that took place in May 2006.

Lawrence Wilkerson: Yes, that was much later, but to return to Afghanistan, the regular meetings were one of my sources of knowing how chaotic the vetting was, and how chaotic the imprisonment was, and how adamant Rumsfeld was — and I've come to find now that Donald would not have been adamant without the Vice President's cover — about not letting any of these guys go, for any reason whatsoever. I also know that one of the motivations for this was not just his obstreperousness, or his arrogance, which was manifested most of the time, but it was the fact that they wanted all of these people questioned vigorously, and they wanted to put together a pattern, a map, a body of evidence, if you will, from all these people, that they thought was going to tell them more and more about al-Qaeda, and increasingly more and more about the connection between al-Qaeda and Baghdad.

I even think that probably, in the summer of 2002, well before Powell gave his presentation at the UN in February 2003, their priority had shifted, as their expectation of another attack went down, and that happened, I think, rather rapidly. I've just stumbled on this. I thought before that it had persisted all the way through 2002, but I'm convinced now, from talking to hundreds of people, literally, that that's not the case, that their fear of another attack subsided

rather rapidly after their attention turned to Iraq, and after Tommy Franks, in late November as I recall, was directed to begin planning for Iraq and to take his focus off Afghanistan.

So those discussions that went on — the cables that came in, the Secretary and the Deputy Secretary, all the cognizant people in the Department of State, Pierre, and their discussions every morning, sidebar discussions in the corridors on the seventh floor, indeed, discussions with me in my office, once I became Chief of Staff in August 2002 — that was one source. Another source was military personnel whom I'd known in the past or who people I'd known in the past introduced to me as good sources, who reported to me from, essentially, all over the world, not just Afghanistan and Iraq, but places like Indonesia, places like Djibouti, and so forth, about what was going on with regard to what the Defense Department was calling “kinetic activity”; that is to say, Delta Force and the like, spread all over the world looking for al-Qaeda, and what was happening in the various countries and cities where they were doing this.

Other information came from other places like conventional formations in Afghanistan and Iraq, where I had people I knew in the military who were reporting back to me, usually by email, and also from the other side of the house, if you will, from the diplomats and the people in the embassies and the consulates and so forth in some of these countries, some of whom were much dismayed that they had, as one ambassador put it, 6' 4" white males with 19-inch biceps walking around in their capital cities, and did anybody really think that they were fooling anyone, and when was somebody going to tell him why they were in his capital city? You know, these were forces that Rumsfeld and [Douglas] Feith [the undersecretary of defense for policy] spread across the world to go after everything from Abu Sayyaf to Jemaah Islamiyah to al-Qaeda, and our ambassadors knew nothing about it initially, but these people were very visible, and they were discovered, and calls began to come back from cities around the world to the Secretary of State and to others about who were these people and what were they doing.

And they were also detaining people, because I believe that Rumsfeld's first goal there was — he didn't trust the CIA, he didn't trust their interrogation, he didn't trust what they were doing — so he wanted his own activity, he wanted his own action. That's one of the reasons that the procedures that the President, for example, had confined to a very select group of “high-value detainees” and to just the CIA as the instrument of interrogation — that's how that migrated over to the Defense Department, essentially through Rumsfeld's distrust of the CIA, and, frankly, bureaucratic jealousy, and a grab for power. And so Rumsfeld wanted his people doing the same thing, and Jim Haynes, his lawyer in the Defense Department, was perfectly willing to go over to David Addington, and [John] Yoo and [Jay] Bybee and the rest, and craft his own legal views for justifying what the Defense Department then struck out to do.

But much of the reporting that was coming back to me was coming back not just from this massive chaos in the battlefield areas, which Abu Ghraib, of course, with regard to Iraq, came to characterize most vividly, but also from these other detentions that were going on around the

world, because, as I said, Rumsfeld's first priority was to capture, not to kill. If they got in extremis, they were authorized to kill, as Seymour Hersh has stumbled onto, but their real goal was to capture them and to provide more intelligence for this "mosaic" that Rumsfeld and crew were building up, so that they could understand more about al-Qaeda, and more about terrorism in general, and go after these people.

So that was another source. Still another source was people who were involved in detainee management. These were contractors — CIA and military — who were a little bit uneasy about what they were being asked to do, and by whom they were being asked to do it, and without, in some cases, any paperwork to cover their butts, so to speak, and they were sending cables back, and they were talking to people, and people were talking to me, about the disquiet that was going on amongst people who were either seeing some of these things happen, or in some cases were actually involved in it, in some way, and weren't happy about what they were doing.

I've said before that one of the things that, with regard to the armed forces, has made me proud of a lot of those young guys out there — and young gals out there — was that a lot of these people apparently refused to do this stuff, and their leaders, whether they were captains or lieutenants, or whether they were majors, lieutenant colonels, colonels, brigadier generals or whatever, were not eager to order them to, because they knew, from past experience, that when that happens, then you get whistleblowers, you get people who write their congressmen, and call their congressmen, and take pictures and so forth, so I was elated to hear that a lot of these young officers — in particular, young NCOs — were refusing to do this stuff, but nonetheless they were talking about what others were doing.

Andy Worthington: And, just to confirm, you're talking about detention and interrogations in Afghanistan, Iraq and many other places, I mean, was this kind of across the board?

Lawrence Wilkerson: Yes, and it wasn't just interrogation, as you indicated, it was some of the things that happened when they were detaining prisoners for the initial time on the battlefield, it was some of the other things that happened other than just officially sitting down in a room and being interrogated, the whole detention system and the management thereof.

Andy Worthington: Well, I'm very glad to hear you talk about that, and about the numbers of people refusing to take part in abusive behavior, because I realize that it was such a shock to so many serving military personnel that they were expecting the Geneva Conventions, and that was all stripped away, and suddenly they're in a chaotic place, where, it seems, anything goes, and presumably, for so many of these people, the only rule seemed to be some kind of sadism, so I'm really pleased that you mentioned how much feedback was coming from people who were appalled by it and who refused to take part in it.

Lawrence Wilkerson: There was one young lieutenant, who happened to be a Pakistani American, who was fluent in Urdu and one of the Afghan languages, and who also spoke enough Arabic to get by in Iraq. He gave me some really electrifying vignettes, about leading his platoon the first year that he was over there, and some of the things that he had to do that made him feel like he was risking his life in order to, as he put it, obey the law.

Andy Worthington: You've made it very clear how much professional jealousy encouraged Donald Rumsfeld to drive the "CIA-ization" of the military's way of treating prisoners, which is horrific really....

Lawrence Wilkerson: It wasn't a surprise to me, because I spent 31 years in the DoD, and I have to say that the entity we probably disliked the most during the majority of my years was the Central Intelligence Agency. I mean, we would sit out in the Pacific, when I was working out there, and our station chiefs then, we would mock them, you know: big fat dudes, making 120, 130 thousand a year, and all they did was sit there and read the newspapers in their capital cities and report it back to Langley as finished intelligence. I mean, we didn't have much use for the CIA and that's generally the way the rank and file in the Pentagon feels — and in the military in general. I remember in the first Gulf War, when Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin Powell were on the phone at Colin Powell's house — a secure phone; late in the evening for Powell, and early in the morning for Schwarzkopf — and Norm was threatening to come to Washington and shoot the DCI.

So I mean, there's always been that institutional jealousy, hatred even between the Pentagon and the CIA, so I didn't have much difficulty understanding that that was a part of what had happened, and you add Rumsfeld's arrogance and his power play to it, and you've got a real, powerfully dysfunctional system there, in terms of — as Powell put it in his debrief to President Bush, January 13, 2005, if I recall, "Mr. President, you have no idea." Bush had just said, "Well, you've lived through Weinberger and Shultz, you know that there's always infighting," and Powell's response was, "Mr. President, you have no idea. This is an order of magnitude worse." Frankly, I think that was the first time anybody had ever alerted the President to the fact that his wasn't a normal administration.

Andy Worthington: And that's important to raise, because so much of what went on focused on Cheney, obviously, and I was going to ask you a little bit about Cheney — and Addington, because I was particularly struck by a passage in Jane Mayer's book, [*The Dark Side*](#). Mayer was writing about when John Bellinger, legal counsel to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, had discovered, from intelligence reports, that a significant number of innocent men were being held at Guantánamo, but when he tried to approach the President about it (via Alberto Gonzales, who

was then White House Counsel), they were met by Addington instead, who dismissed Bellinger's concerns by declaring, "No, there will be no review. The President has determined that they are ALL enemy combatants. We are not going to revisit it!" After Bellinger fired back, pointing out that this was "a violation of basic notions of American fairness," Addington replied, "We are not second-guessing the President's decision. These are 'enemy combatants.' Please use that phrase. They've all been through a screening process. There's nothing to talk about."

Lawrence Wilkerson: I received one particular assessment from a person for whom I had no reason whatsoever to believe that he would give me an inaccurate portrayal — and one reason was, that was his character, but another reason was that he had no dog in the fight — and his estimate of the number of people — I think it was 741 or 742 that we suddenly had on a piece of paper somewhere — of any significance was as follows. He said, "I'll tell you right now that 700 of them haven't done a damn thing except get in the way of somebody capturing them."

Andy Worthington: Right, and those are the kinds of figures that we're down to. I mean, back in March, you stated that no more than a couple of dozen had any serious intelligence value....

Lawrence Wilkerson: The other thing — I laughed at this when I first heard it, but now I realize it was probably closer to the truth than anything the administration said — when Bush announced in September 2006, with some degree of trepidation, that he'd [transferred these 14 to Guantánamo](#) out of the secret prisons. Now I realize that they made that transfer principally so they could get some hardcore terrorists to Guantánamo.

In the second part of this interview, Col. Wilkerson discusses, amongst other things, Barack Obama's response to the legacy of the Bush administration, and the madness of Dick Cheney.

Andy Worthington is the author of [The Guantánamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America's Illegal Prison](#) (published by Pluto Press) and serves as policy advisor to the Future of Freedom Foundation. Visit his website at: www.andyworthington.co.uk.

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