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An Interview with Col. Lawrence Wilkerson, Part 2

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 U.S.-Cuba 21st Century Policy Initiative](#).

In the [first part](#) of this interview, Col. Wilkerson discussed fears within the State Department that war crimes were taking place in Afghanistan, how he suspected that the British Overseas Territory of Diego Garcia (leased to the U.S.) was used to hold prisoners in the "war on terror," and, perhaps most significantly, how he had recently become convinced that the administration's fear of another terrorist attack (which was, essentially, used to justify the implementation of "extraordinary rendition" and torture) subsided more rapidly than has been previously acknowledged, as the drive for war in Iraq took over.

The second part of the interview begins with further discussion of the significance of Col. Wilkerson's statement that no more than a couple of dozen of the prisoners at Guantánamo had any serious intelligence value, and also includes reflections on how former Vice President [Dick Cheney](#) is "crazy," how the Democrats have no spine and the mainstream media has no principles, and how the U.S. had no Arabic experts at the time of the 9/11 attacks except a handful in the FBI who were promptly sidelined.

Col. Wilkerson also spoke about how [the investigation into the CIA's destruction of 92 videotapes](#) recording the interrogations of "high-value detainees," which is being conducted by federal prosecutor John Durham (who was recently appointed by Attorney General [Eric Holder](#) to [investigate the abuse of prisoners held by the CIA](#)) could be explosive, described the crucial role played by Cheney's closest advisors, his legal counsel David Addington and I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby (who [resigned](#) as chief of staff in October 2005 after being indicted in the Valerie Plame scandal, was convicted but had [his sentence dismissed](#) by President Bush in July 2007), and concluded by admitting that, until January 2004, he had no idea of the extent to which the State Department had been excluded from the machinations of Cheney's "war cabinet."

Andy Worthington: I've watched these figures over the years — suggesting that only somewhere between two dozen and 40 of the prisoners had any connection with terrorism — so it was great for me when you raised that issue in March, in your article for [The Washington Note](#), and I wondered what you thought about what's happening with the Obama administration. They seem to be listening to a certain amount of scaremongering — as when Robert Gates suddenly popped up in April and started talking about legislating for [a new preventive detention policy](#) for 50 to 100 of the prisoners. Now to me, even the notion of introducing preventive detention legally, if you like — the Bush administration having done it illegally, as I regard it — is a terrifying prospect, having to think that they should even be contemplating doing that, but it also suggests that they're reading too much into the significance of the prisoners, and I wondered what your thoughts were on that.

Lawrence Wilkerson: Well, to keep it brief, I think the problem is that this is a national security issue, and there are so many more challenging issues — as one official put it to me the other day — on which the President has already shown some ankle, whether it's about talking to Iran or whether it's his rather pronounced silence vis-à-vis North Korea, or whether it's something as minuscule as lifting some travel restrictions on Cuban Americans for Cuba. They don't believe they can show another square centimeter of ankle on national security, because the Republicans will eat their lunch, and every time I'm told this I die laughing. I say, your guys are captured by the Sith Lord, Dick Cheney, you're captured by Rush Limbaugh, whose real radio audience is about 2.2 million, and whose employer, Clear Channel, lost \$3.7 billion in the second quarter of this year. I said, when are you gonna wake up? These are kooks. And Cheney is the kook leader. But [Nancy] Pelosi and [Harry] Reid are such feckless leaders they haven't got any spine. We have no leadership in the legislative branch on either side of the aisle.

Andy Worthington: I agree with you absolutely there ...

Lawrence Wilkerson: I become exasperated. There's just no courage, there's no moral courage whatsoever in the Democratic Party.

Andy Worthington: Unfortunately, when it comes to getting rid of Guantánamo after all these long years, somebody's going to have to come up with some courage at some point, because this question of the prisoners' significance is the crucial issue to me. The hardest thing should be coming up with countries to take some of the men, not [still sitting around discussing](#) whether it's still worth holding them. We should be focusing on the — whatever it is, two dozen, three dozen, four dozen at most — and doing everything in our power to get the rest of those guys out of there, to close the place down.

Lawrence Wilkerson: I agree, and from what my diplomatic colleagues tell me now, it's difficult to get countries to accept them because we've taken such a hard stance with [the Congress not approving the money](#) and not wanting anyone even imprisoned in our maximum-security prisons in this country, which is preposterous.

Andy Worthington: Yes, exactly. I mean, how safe do you think your prisons have to be?

Lawrence Wilkerson: Another part of this that I discovered — it shouldn't have shocked me, but it did surprise me — was that when 9/11 went down there was no interrogation capability in the United States, other than in the Federal Bureau of Investigation. There was none. Everything the military had was geared still to the Cold War, everything the CIA had had been dismantled, and the FBI had maybe — the best figures I've been able to get my hands on of people who were fluent in Arabic or Farsi or maybe both, and they also were culturally sensitive, knew something about the region from which the detainee might come, knew something about his tribal affiliations and so forth — there were maybe two dozen. Here we have this attack, and then we captured people, and we had no interrogation capability other than a small contingent in the Bureau.

Andy Worthington: And they were sidelined ...

Lawrence Wilkerson: Yes, after they proved their worth, they were sidelined.

Andy Worthington: To me that's still the biggest shock about the whole story, and it's the clearest example of why disregarding that experience in the FBI was such a disaster.

Lawrence Wilkerson: But it was something this administration almost made a cult of doing — not just on interrogation, but on almost everything, whether it was Iraq, whether it was the Middle East in general, whether it was North Korea. The attitude was: Don't talk to me from a position of expertise, talk to me from a position of fixed religious adamancy, you know.

Andy Worthington: Exactly. And again, that was the story that impressed me in Jane Mayer's book, *The Dark Side*, when, after understanding that there were so many "Mickey Mouse prisoners," as General Dunlavey called them, John Bellinger, who, at the time, was the National Security Council's Legal Advisor, went to try and have a meeting with Alberto Gonzales, when he was still Bush's Counsel, and found David Addington there, and Addington said, we're not bothered about what you've got to say about innocence and guilt. The President has said they're all guilty on capture, that's the end of the story, nobody's reviewing it. You know, it's an example of justifying actions on the basis of executive power, and as you said as well, if you're going to get into the details of why on earth are you doing it, it's because they thought they could very slowly build this "mosaic" of intelligence that would take forever, of every terrorist movement, every insurgent movement ever, and who knows how many people that would involve? I think the number of people in U.S. custody throughout the Bush years is over 80,000, isn't it?

Lawrence Wilkerson: The figures I came across for Iraq, Afghanistan, secret prisons, Guantánamo, people who were being held in prisons in other countries on our behalf — the highest figure I ever came to was about 65,000, but it could have well been more than that.

Andy Worthington: And I get the feeling that they would just have gone on forever if they could ...

Lawrence Wilkerson: Well, I mean, that was it, it's a hard slog, it's war, and therefore, if we say it's never over then they're always detained. I remember [Colin] Powell and Taft — Taft was his legal advisor, Will Taft — asking a question, something to the effect of, "What's final disposition?" and [Donald] Rumsfeld's response was something like, "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

Andy Worthington: That's another thing, really, is that at no point did they ever seem to have any concept of how something might end. They started things and had no idea what their ultimate plan was. What, you really intend to hold people forever without charging them with anything? You really want to kidnap people on an industrial scale and have secret prisons and — you don't know what you're going to do at the end of this, do you? Everything was started with no thought for how it might possibly be concluded.

Lawrence Wilkerson: I think the principal figure in this — Vice President Cheney — would say, in response to what you've just said, "So what?" I mean, I really do. I wouldn't have said that a couple of years ago, but now I've come to the conclusion that the man truly is — whether he was that way when I knew him before, when he was Secretary of Defense, I don't know, that's not at issue with me any more — the man now is just crazy.

Andy Worthington: Yes, well, I'm glad you said that. In March you called him evil. Crazy is — you know, he just seems to be a deranged man, I'm surprised he's been getting so much air time.

Lawrence Wilkerson: It's our media. Our media loves to keep it going. They love to throw him out there and, you know, stoke the fires. I asked a couple of people fairly high up in our media world, "Why in the world do you continue to give him and Limbaugh an audience? Why? Why do you even put them on the same plane as the president of the United States? Why do you have these dueling speeches? You guys made them dueling speeches, not the two principals." Well, you know, they're running out of business. People are canceling their newspaper subscriptions every day. They want news.

Andy Worthington: And they're more interested in hearing this than they are in hearing that this madman was the driver of [manufacturing false intelligence through torture](#) to justify the invasion of Iraq.

Lawrence Wilkerson: Well, they helped in that.

Andy Worthington: Of course, that's why they don't want to talk about it.

Lawrence Wilkerson: With the exception of Knight Ridder, now McClatchy, they just about all helped.

Andy Worthington: Yes, it's true, but I'm still shocked at how that's underreported in the Cheney story, because he's just been allowed too much time to carry on trying to sell his own version of it: that torture saved us from some attack that we're not allowed to find out about, that nobody can seem to find any evidence for, but maybe the more it goes on — I mean, he really does seem like a crazy man. He had the chance to relax and he doesn't know how to do it.

Lawrence Wilkerson: Yep. He even got his family out there.

Andy Worthington: Well, how else would you deal with him, I suppose, if you were related to him?

Lawrence Wilkerson: I do think there's some fear in it too. I think there's some folks realizing that there may be, at a minimum, some problems with traveling, and at a maximum, there may even be — I just don't think there's a political will in this country to do anything truly dramatic to bring some accountability to this, but I do think that these people, much the way that military people do still, count their reputation and their legacy and how the history books are going to look at them as something significant, and as they grow older it grows in importance, so that, you know, they don't want to be tarnished, and I think Cheney's seriously concerned about where he's going to go in the history books.

Andy Worthington: Well, I understand that. I think it ought to be more serious than that, but I've felt all along that, although prosecutions ought to happen because, you know, torture statutes have been broken, but apparently nobody is going to be held ultimately responsible, that's really not an acceptable position. The position taken by Obama, it seems, is to say, well, OK, we're going to clean up our act but we're not going to hold these people to account, but whichever way you look at it, it certainly doesn't leave Cheney in the clear....

Lawrence Wilkerson: No. My wife thinks that ultimately there's going to be something. I'm a little more cynical than she, but she's convinced that this investigation that's been going on [by John Durham] — very low-key, the guy's very persistent, he's very determined, he reminds me of [Patrick] Fitzgerald on the Valerie Plame case, and his starting point is the destruction of the videotapes, and I'm told he's got a plan, and he's following that plan, and I'm told that plan is bigger than I think.

Andy Worthington: Well, I'm quite encouraged by that, because I've not heard too much about that investigation. I've heard more about [the long-awaited Justice Department investigation](#) into the lawyers at the Office of Legal Counsel who wrote [the torture memos](#), and from what I've heard about that investigation, it seemed to involve establishing concrete, irrefutable connections between Dick Cheney's office and the Office of Legal Counsel, because the torture memos have come out, and somehow still it's as if the lawyers did it themselves....

Lawrence Wilkerson: Yep.

Andy Worthington: And what's needed is: no, the lawyers were told what to do, they agreed that they would not think independently, and they would make the advice what was required, and if a chain leads infallibly up to that particular office, then how can they wriggle out of it? I understand that Dick Cheney was, I think, driven mad after 9/11 by his fear and his paranoia, and a lot of his unsavory impulses took over what may have been left of his humanity, and he became consumed by it, and I don't think anybody doubts that in some

ways they were motivated by the fear of another attack, but when you break the law, which is what they did, is it enough to be able to leave office and your crimes go with you? Is that enough?

Lawrence Wilkerson: Well, you know, I've read some of the language in the International [Convention Against Torture](#), and in the document that President Clinton had to submit finally to the Senate, and I've read the Senate's qualification of that document too, but, you know, this is in order to become a signatory to the treaty, to promise to the treaty holder that you will do as necessary, to make your domestic law conform to the law encased in the treaty, and it's pretty clear that there is no national emergency "out," there's no exit.

Andy Worthington: No, there isn't. It's Article 2.2 of the Convention, which says, "No exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat or war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture."

Lawrence Wilkerson: And that's not something we qualified, that's not something where we said, "Oh, that's a little part of it we don't agree with, but we'll still be a signatory."

Andy Worthington: And that, of course, explains why it was crucial in the OLC memos to redefine torture so that torture wasn't happening.

Lawrence Wilkerson: Right.

Andy Worthington: I mean, why would you do that unless you know that it was illegal?

Lawrence Wilkerson: Yes, and to me that's why so many people kept saying, "We don't torture." They had to get that on the record that this is what they believed, because that was the legal opinion that they had. Now the man who, to me, brings all of this together more than Cheney himself, because he has one foot in the legal camp — and I must admit it's a fairly brilliant foot — and he has one foot in the operator camp, that's [David Addington](#). That is to say, Addington was very influential, maybe to the point of maximally influential with that idiot Gonzales, and everything that flowed from Gonzales, both when he was Bush's counsel and when he was attorney general, and was also influential through his connection with Libby, and Libby's ability to coordinate the interagency group that essentially worked for the vice president — not for the president but for the vice president. Addington was both the Zawahiri and the bin Laden.

Andy Worthington: What a fabulous analogy that is.

Lawrence Wilkerson: David's a strange person. When he was working for Cheney, when Cheney was secretary of defense, we in the uniformed military used to refer to him as "Weird David."

Andy Worthington: Yes, well he was just in the right place to push everything where it shouldn't have gone after 9/11, wasn't he?

Lawrence Wilkerson: He was perfectly placed. He and Libby both. They were perfectly placed.

Andy Worthington: But it is extraordinary the lack of public accountability and the absolute significance of Addington's role in all those years. I mean, I can't think of another period in American history when somebody who was working for the vice president so often actually seemed to be running the show.

Lawrence Wilkerson: It is extraordinary with regard to the office of the vice president. I mean, it's hard to go back and find anybody ever in that position who gathered to himself as much power as Dick Cheney did.

Andy Worthington: Sure.

Lawrence Wilkerson: I mean, I can find places where Alexander Hamilton as aide-de-camp to George Washington was as influential as George Washington was during a specific instance at a specific time or a specific date, but it wasn't something that pertained throughout Washington's command of the continental armies or his Presidency.

Andy Worthington: And I think earlier, when you were saying about Colin Powell telling the President in January 2005 —

Lawrence Wilkerson: January 13, 2005.

Andy Worthington: — that he had no idea of the scale of what was going on, that was an insight for me into how the president really didn't know who was actually running the show.

Lawrence Wilkerson: The sad thing is that, until early January 2004, I'm not sure we did either. I understood that there was a team, I understood it was highly placed and probably under the vice president, I understood that it was membered in almost every aspect of the interagency group that dealt with national security, I understood they had a strategy, I understood they were ruthless in carrying out that strategy, and I understood that I was a day late and a dollar short, because they'd beaten me to the marketplace. But it took me a while to figure that out. I even figured out that they were reading my emails, but I wasn't reading theirs.

Andy Worthington: Well, I'm sure, but I suppose why wouldn't it when they were so obsessively secretive? And on that note, I guess I'll let you get on. It's been a real pleasure meeting you here on the phone and talking to you, and I'm sure those who read this interview will be grateful that you took the time to do so.

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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