



Cry Wolf and let slip the dogs of war

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The news that Paul Wolfowitz, the US deputy defence secretary neo-con hawk, is a leading contender to head the World Bank has sent a frisson of fear down the spines of development experts across the globe.

So great is the predicted backlash that one might almost suspect he is only there to secure Europe's assent to a rival candidate.

There is certainly a danger of establishing a worrying trend. Mr Wolfowitz would not be the first Pentagon alumnus to secure the post. In 1968 Robert McNamara, Kennedy and Johnson's defence secretary, went straight from spearheading the Vietnam conflict to a lengthy stint as Bank president.

But it would be worrying if waging war were to become an essential for securing the world's top development job. Around the world, ambitious defence secretaries might start launching pre-emptive strikes on small nations every time the post was due to come up. It could be a bloodbath.

Then again it might be argued that the fundamental weakness of James Wolfensohn, outgoing president, was that he had never actually bombed anywhere and so had become over-fond of routine explosions at staff.

There are, of course, those who feel that Mr Wolfowitz would be a conservative hardliner brought in to neuter the Bank. For these quibblers his "weaknesses" would include his views, his pivotal role in the Iraq conflict, the hostility of European board members and his lack of serious management experience.

But surely this is to take the job specifications too literally. When one digs deeper Mr Wolfowitz emerges as a far more attractive candidate. He has been a strong proponent of debt relief, although admittedly mainly for Iraq.

Furthermore, the Iraq conflict proves his commitment to using resources on the ground to drive regeneration, although those on the ground do have to be the 15th Airborne; a sort of peace corps with mortars.

The time has also clearly come for the Bank to lash out in some bold new directions. Political and institutional corruption undermines many aid efforts so, after years of trying and failing to alter the approach of recipient administrations, think how refreshing it will be to go for out and out regime change instead.

There is the thorny issue of whether the World Bank's charter legally precludes such direct political action as, say, invasion, but Alberto Gonzales, US Attorney General, thinks it will be all right as long as the interventions are classified as "coercive aid projects" rather than aerial bombardment. After all, there must be a security component in dealing with failed states - or redevelopment with extreme prejudice as the aid community calls it.

Meanwhile, some will worry that his ideology could bring the Bank into conflict with its most important client, China, but then again it does not seem to have harmed US/Sino relations unduly. After all it is not as if Beijing is an outpost of tyranny or anything.

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