Ep. 18: Setting the record straight on Iraq, Israel and neoconservatism

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In this episode of Mideast Horizons, Lahav Harkov speaks with Dr. David Wurmser, who served as senior advisor to U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney and special assistant to Under Secretary of State John Bolton. Wurmser offers a rare, behind-the-scenes portrait of Cheney during the Iraq War, recalling his frustration with policymakers who distanced themselves from the conflict when it became politically difficult, and his enduring sense of duty toward the soldiers serving there.

Wurmser reflects on divisions within the Bush administration that shaped the Iraq War strategy. The conflict between advocates of overwhelming force and those favoring a lighter footprint, which relied on supporting a local or exile Iraqi army to take the lead, left the United States caught between conflicting approaches, ultimately harming the war effort. He critiques the broader American impulse to pursue rapid social transformation in the Middle East, arguing that genuine reform must be gradual and organic. Addressing claims that Israel encouraged the invasion, he stresses that Israeli officials "vehemently opposed" it and repeatedly warned Washington that Iran, not Iraq, was the true danger.

Exploring the intellectual roots of neoconservatism, Wurmser traces its evolution from the moral clarity of the Reagan era to its post–Cold War misapplication, suggesting that one of the Iraq War's central flaws was "overconfidence in the Iraqi people." Finally, he revisits the much-debated "Clean Break" paper he co-authored for Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996, clarifying that it did not advocate an American war but called for Israel to assume greater strategic self-reliance and act as a confident, integrated Western ally. "It was the inversion of what people say it was," he concludes, arguing that Israel had matured from a state in need of protection to a strategic pillar of the West.

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