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There's hope in Bush's hawkish nomination

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Yesterday's news that President George W. Bush has nominated Paul Wolfowitz, US deputy defence secretary, outspoken neo-con and one of the architects of the Iraq war, as its candidate for the presidency of the World Bank has no doubt raised plenty of eyebrows.

As the world's leading development body, the bank is at the forefront of efforts to deal with global poverty. Some of the world's poorest inhabitants are found in those nations that have either been left behind by or opted out of the global economy: in other words, failed and failing states, and weak and impoverished ones. Such countries have the potential to be internationally destabilising, by becoming hosts for terrorism, organised crime or infectious diseases that can subsequently spread beyond their crumbling borders.

So the bank's mandate reflects not only the moral imperative of providing help to some of our planet's most vulnerable inhabitants, but also a strong element of self-interest on the part of the rest of the world in dealing with globalisation's failures.

The second five-year term of the World Bank's president, James Wolfensohn, comes to an end at the end of this month. While Wolfowitz's appointment requires the formal approval of the bank's 184 members, the longstanding arrangement is that the US gets to choose the head of the bank, just as the Europeans get to pick the managing director of the International Monetary Fund. This carve-up of the leadership of two principal international institutions has long been a source of irritation to the rest of the world, but to date calls for a more open recruitment process have fallen on stony ground.

Many observers are likely to find the Wolfowitz nomination disappointing; particularly since earlier this year there had been much discussion of the need to appoint a candidate with significant development experience. Despite one stint as an ambassador to Indonesia and another as an assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs in the 1980s, Wolfowitz clearly fails to meet this criterion.

Others are likely to find the nomination not just disappointing, but also provocative given Wolfowitz's high-profile association with the Iraq War. Indeed, it has already been cited, alongside last week's nomination of John Bolton as the US representative to the UN, as evidence of a sort of Yankee "slap in the face" for multilateralism.

Yet this week's move is not without precedent. The most obvious parallel is the first time that a US president decided that the Defence Department would provide a suitable candidate: president Lyndon Johnson appointed Robert McNamara, US secretary of defence during the Vietnam War, to the World Bank presidency, and McNamara served in that role from 1968 to 1981.

It's also worth remembering that Bill Clinton's nomination of Wolfensohn similarly saw detractors bemoan a lack of any substantive development experience. Yet, while the incumbent is certainly not without his critics, many observers would agree that he will be leaving the bank a stronger institution than he found it.

More intriguingly, there is also an interesting logic to the decision. Wolfowitz has been a key player in a US administration where international policy has been overwhelmingly focused on the geostrategic threats posed by terrorism and rogue states. So an optimistic take would be that his appointment to the bank may signal an intention to pursue a more comprehensive approach to these issues — in effect combining deterrence with development.

The links between terrorism and poverty may not be as straightforward as they are sometimes painted. Nevertheless, one key element of any durable response to international terrorism is to provide a solution to the problem of failed and failing states. In the long term, such a solution will be economic rather than military.

If Washington decides to take this economic challenge seriously, then one of the architects of pre-emptive war might — perhaps surprisingly — turn out to be precisely the right person to focus development policy on the pressing need for a pre-emptive strike on global poverty.

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