

WASHINGTON - When The Washington Post published a list of the people whom Karl Rove, President George W Bush's closest advisor, regularly consults for advice outside the administration, foreign policy veterans were shocked when Michael Ledeen popped up as the only full-time international affairs analyst.

"The two met after Bush's election," the Post reported cheerfully, quoting Ledeen about Rove's request that "any time you have a good idea, tell me". "More than once, Ledeen has seen his ideas, faxed to Rove, become official policy or rhetoric," noted the newspaper.

"When I saw that, I couldn't believe it," said one retired senior diplomat. "But then again, with this administration, it seemed frighteningly plausible."

Michael A Ledeen, resident scholar in the Freedom Chair at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), where he works closely with the better-known former chairman of the Defense Policy Board, Richard Perle, has been a fixture of Washington's neo-conservative community for more than 20 years. But he is now out front, in a public campaign for the United States to confront Iran, warning that Tehran will cause Washington problems in both Iraq and Afghanistan and that "the mullahs are determined to obliterate Israel".

"We are now engaged in a regional struggle in the Middle East, and the Iranian tyrants are the keystone of the terror network," he wrote in Monday's Post. "Far more than the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the defeat of the mullahcracy and the triumph of freedom in Tehran would be a truly historic event and an enormous blow to the terrorists."

Along with Morris Amitay, a former top lobbyist for the most powerful pro-Israel lobby in Washington, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, Ledeen has already co-founded a new group, called the Coalition for Democracy in Iran (CDI), which is pressing Congress to approve a pending bill that would, among other things, provide some US\$50 million in aid to both exile groups and opposition forces in Iran.

To Ledeen, whose own contacts with the mullahs in the Iran-Contra affair 15 years ago remain the source of some mystery, Iran is "the mother of modern terrorism". And terrorism has been Ledeen's bread and butter since at least the late 1970s, when he consulted for Italian military intelligence, which in turn enabled him to expose Billy Carter's dealings with the Muammar Gaddafi regime in Libya to the great satisfaction of Republicans, who were revving up their campaign against Billy's brother, then president Jimmy Carter.

Ledeen's right-wing Italian connections - including alleged ties to the P-2 Masonic Lodge that rocked Italy in the early 1980s - have long been a source of speculation and intrigue, but he returned to Washington in 1981 as "anti-terrorism" advisor to the new secretary of state, Al Haig.

Over the next several years, Ledeen used his position as consultant to Haig, the Pentagon and the National Security Council under Ronald Reagan to boost the notion of a global terrorist conspiracy based in the Kremlin, whose KGB pulled the strings of all of the world's key terrorist groups, especially in the Middle East.

He was a heavy promoter of the thesis that it was the KGB that was behind the 1981 attempted assassination by Turkish right-winger, Mehmet Ali Agca, of Pope John Paul II, a view he continues to expound today and which also helps explain his contempt for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), whose analysts never accepted the "Bulgarian Connection", as it was called.

In the mid-1980s, when Ledeen was working for the National Security Council, he tangled with the CIA again over his efforts with Israeli spy David Kimche to gain the release of US hostages in Beirut through an Iranian arms dealer, Manucher Ghorbanifar, in the opening stages of what would become the Iran-Contra affair.

But Ghorbanifar did not come through. Despite Ledeen's assessment of the middleman as "one of the most honest, educated, honorable men I have ever known", he flunked four lie detector tests administered by the CIA, which had long warned that the Iranian "should be regarded as an intelligence fabricator and a nuisance".

Undaunted and untouched by the Iran-Contra investigation, Ledeen recorded his experience in *Perilous Statecraft: An Insider's Account of the Iran-Contra Affair*, one of more than 10 books he has written on US foreign policy, de Tocqueville, Machiavelli and terrorism, the latest of which is titled *The War Against the Terror Masters: Why It Happened. Where We Are Now. How We'll Win*.

Ledeen has been no less prolific in his organizational work, although, besides AEI - where he works with fellow foreign policy neo-cons Perle, former United Nations ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Joshua Muravchik and Reuel Marc Gerecht - his main institutional forum over the past 25 years has been the Jewish Institute of National Security Affairs (JINSA), an activist group that promotes a strategic alliance between the United States and Israel.

He has also served on the board of the US Committee for a Free Lebanon and has taken an organizing role in CDI. His co-founder there, Amitay, also works for JINSA.

He is also close to key figures in the administration, particularly Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Douglas Feith, whose pro-Likud politics he largely shares; Vice President Dick Cheney's powerful chief of staff, I Lewis Libby; and Elliott Abrams, the director for the Near East on the National Security Council. To that list can now apparently be added Rove, who is as close to Bush as it is possible to get.

Throughout his career, Ledeen has insisted that war and violence are integral parts of human nature and derided the notion that peace can be negotiated between two nations. He was a fierce opponent of the Oslo peace process. "I don't know of a case in history where peace has been accomplished in any way other than one side winning a war [and] imposing terms on the other side," he said two years ago.

He also has expressed little faith in traditional US allies, notably in "Old Europe", which he spent much of the 1980s attacking for being insufficiently anti-Soviet. As Washington moved toward war in Iraq, for example, he even questioned whether France and Germany were in league with al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein.

"The Franco-German strategy was based on using Arab and Islamic extremism and terrorism as the weapon of choice, and the United Nations as the straitjacket for blocking a decisive response from the United States," he wrote, suggesting three weeks later, as the US offensive stalled on its way to Baghdad, that France and Germany be treated as "strategic enemies".

For Ledeen, Iraq was only the beginning of the broader struggle against the "terror masters". "As soon as we land in Iraq, we're going to face the whole terrorist network," he told an interviewer in March. "Iran, Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia are the big four, and then there's Libya." "You can't solve all problems I grant that," he told the BBC. "I mean, I wrote a book about Machiavelli, and I know the struggle against evil is going to go forever."