

WOLFOWITZ: "IRAQ WAR WAS ABOUT OIL"

By George Wright
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Oil was the main reason for military action against Iraq, a leading White House hawk has claimed, confirming the worst fears of those opposed to the US-led war.

The US deputy defence secretary, **Paul Wolfowitz** - who has already undermined Tony Blair's position over weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by describing them as a "bureaucratic" excuse for war - has now gone further by claiming the real motive was that Iraq is "swimming" in oil.

The latest comments were made by Mr Wolfowitz in an address to delegates at an Asian security summit in Singapore at the weekend, and reported today by German newspapers Der Tagesspiegel and Die Welt.

Asked why a nuclear power such as North Korea was being treated differently from Iraq, where hardly any weapons of mass destruction had been found, the deputy defence minister said: **"Let's look at it simply. The most important difference between North Korea and Iraq is that economically, we just had no choice in Iraq. The country swims on a sea of oil."**

Mr Wolfowitz went on to tell journalists at the conference that the US was set on a path of negotiation to help defuse tensions between North Korea and its neighbours - in contrast to the more belligerent attitude the Bush administration displayed in its dealings with Iraq.

His latest comments follow his widely reported statement from an interview in Vanity Fair last month, in which he said that "for reasons that have a lot to do with the US government bureaucracy, we settled on the one issue that everyone could agree on: weapons of mass destruction."

Prior to that, his boss, defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, had already undermined the British government's position by saying Saddam Hussein may have destroyed his banned weapons before the war.

Mr Wolfowitz's frank assessment of the importance of oil could not come at a worse time for the US and UK governments, which are both facing fierce criticism at home and abroad over allegations that they exaggerated the threat posed by Saddam Hussein in order to justify the war.

Amid growing calls from all parties for a public inquiry, the foreign affairs select committee announced last night it would investigate claims that the UK government misled the country over its evidence of Iraq's WMD.

The move is a major setback for Tony Blair, who had hoped to contain any inquiry within the intelligence and security committee, which meets in secret and reports to the prime minister.

In the US, the failure to find solid proof of chemical, biological and nuclear arms in Iraq has raised similar concerns over Mr Bush's justification for the war and prompted calls for congressional investigations.