

The Neocons are Talking War—Again

By Tom Barry | June 8, 2006

The neocons are largely united over Iran policy, which they say should have three pillars: avoid diplomacy, which they call appeasing the “evildoers;” destabilize Iran and set the stage for regime change by supporting the “true democrats;” and bomb Iran before it poses an imminent threat to Israel or the United States.

The neocons and their allies in the Pentagon and vice president’s office set the Bush administration’s policy on Iraq. As they set their sights on the next target of preventive war and regime change, what the “scholars” at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), Iran Policy Committee, Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, and other neocon groups are saying about Iran merits attention.

In both the House and the Senate, the large majority of policymakers on both sides of the aisle back the Iran Freedom and Democracy Act, whose unstated but implicit objective is U.S.-guided regime change in Iran. Nothing wrong with freedom and democracy—Iranians themselves clearly want more of both—but lawmakers are once again setting the stage for war, just as they did in the late 1990s when they passed similar neocon-inspired bills calling for the liberation of Iran.

Today, the gathering War Party on Iran is discussing a two-pronged strategy—having the United States and Israel begin preparations for military strikes, while at the same time immediately putting into motion a destabilization strategy involving U.S. support for Iranian dissidents.

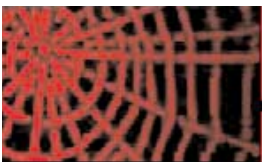
Back in the 1980s, the neoconservatives who helped guide the rollback policies of the Reagan presidency didn’t use the term “regime change.” But the policies they helped put in place—democratization aid to U.S. allies and covert support for “freedom fighters” in Central America, Afghanistan, and Angola—are playing out again in the war on terror. The neocons and liberal hawks are again playing what proved to be a successful strategy.

More alarming still is the easy talk circulating in Washington of missile strikes, bombing, and an expanded U.S. military presence in the Middle East.

Not Just Containment, but “Extended Commitment”

While some neocons are focusing on increasing U.S. democratization aid to media and information projects, others such as Thomas Donnelly, Reuel Gerecht, and Raymond Tanter are talking about military strategies that could advance the war on terrorism in the Middle East.

AEI’s Tom Donnelly explicitly links Iran policy to the overall objective of transforming and controlling the Middle East through new military operations, including an expanded U.S.



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troop presence throughout the region. Donnelly, former top military analyst for the moribund Project for the New American Century (PNAC), was the lead author of *Rebuilding America's Defenses*, PNAC's 2000 policy blueprint for military transformation.

Donnelly contends that a “nuclear Iran” represents a security threat—not so much because Tehran would use the weapons or pass them on to terrorists, but rather because of “the constraining effect it threatens to impose upon U.S. strategy for the greater Middle East.”

In an October 2005 essay in the book *Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran*, Donnelly contends that a “nuclear Iran” represents a security threat—not so much because Tehran would use the weapons or pass them on to terrorists, but rather because of “the constraining effect it threatens to impose upon U.S. strategy for the greater Middle East.” The greatest danger, according to Donnelly, is that the “realists” will “pursue a ‘balance of power’ approach with a nuclear Iran, undercutting the Bush ‘liberation strategy’.”

The scope of U.S. national security strategy extends beyond the “war against radical Islamist networks” to an “extended commitment to reshape the region’s political order in a liberal and democratic fashion,” says Donnelly.

Consequently, “American security strategy requires more than containment or even a ‘roll-back’ of enemies in the greater Middle East; it demands that we establish something more lasting in partnership with local allies. The job for our forces is to create the opportunity for these more representative, liberal, and ultimately stable governments to take root.”

In Iraq, this grand strategy means occupying Iraq beyond the time when there is a “return of sovereignty, democratic elections, and a modicum of security.” Even if the United States successfully achieves these goals, “it will remain obligated to help a free Iraq defend itself in a hostile region.” He warns that U.S. withdrawal is not possible: “There is a substantial ‘defer forward’ mission that looms after the ‘win decisively’ is done. And what is true in Iraq is also true on a smaller scale in Afghanistan.”

Nuclear Earth Penetrators and MEK Empowerment

Raymond Tanter of the Iran Policy Committee says that one option in Iran would be for the U.S. military to use a Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator, which the Pentagon still seems interested in developing. The problem that Tanter sees with using these “bunker-busting” bombs to take out underground Iranian nuclear development facilities is not radiation or setting off a world war, but that the United States would come under international criticism for violating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which bans the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states. Tanter points out that “such a prohibition might not apply as much to Israel,” which is not an NPT signatory. At a press conference in late 2005, Tanter noted, “The United States has sold Israel bunker-

busting bombs, which keeps the military option on the table.”

Tanter’s main mission at the Iran Policy Committee is to have the U.S. government work more closely with the Mujahedin e-Khalq (MEK), which has more than 3,500 militants based in Iraq. “Empowerment requires working with Iranian opposition groups in general and with the main opposition in particular,” advises Tanter. He says the MEK and its political front, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, “are not only the best source for intelligence on Iran’s potential violations of the nonproliferation regime. The NCRI and MEK are also possible allies of the West in bringing about regime change in Tehran.”

Seeing the possibility that a better-financed and -equipped MEK could destabilize the government, Tanter and the Iran Policy Committee have recommended that the State Department remove the cult-like MEK from its list of terrorist organizations and that the U.S. government begin to covertly fund MEK “freedom fighters.”

To Bomb, or Not to Bomb

Neoconservative warmongering and grand delusions fill the pages of the *Weekly Standard*, the flagship magazine established in 1996 by William Kristol, who the next year founded PNAC. In the April 24 issue, Reuel Gerecht discussed military options in the cover story, “To Bomb, or Not to Bomb.”

Gerecht, an AEI resident fellow who once directed PNAC’s Middle East Initiative, warned: “Those who are unwilling to accommodate [Iran] need to be honest and admit that diplomacy and sanctions and covert operations

probably won’t succeed, and that we may have to fight a war—perhaps sooner rather than later—to stop such evil men from obtaining the worst weapons we know.”

If the Israelis “believe they’ve got the goods on the Iranians—for example, finding evidence linking them to anti-Israel/anti-Jewish bombings abroad—then they should by all means retaliate as directly as possible. And Washington should do nothing to discourage an Israeli response, but rather let it be known that the United States will aid the Israelis in any way possible to exact vengeance on the terrorists.”

Six years ago, PNAC published a collection of essays entitled *Present Dangers*, edited by Kristol and fellow PNAC cofounder Robert Kagan, which set forth a radical foreign policy agenda. Typical of neocon thinking, Gerecht equates national security with Israel’s security. In his *Present Dangers* essay on Iran policy, Gerecht wrote: If the Israelis “believe they’ve got the goods on the Iranians—for example, finding evidence linking them to anti-Israel/anti-Jewish bombings abroad—then they should by all means retaliate as directly as possible. And Washington should do nothing to discourage an Israeli response, but rather let it be known that

the United States will aid the Israelis in any way possible to exact vengeance on the terrorists.”

If the U.S. decides to attack, it shouldn't rely on precision strikes on selected targets. “If we attack,” wrote Gerecht, “the U.S. armed forces must strike with truly devastating effect against the ruling mullahs and the repressive institutions that maintain them. That is, no cruise missiles at midnight to minimize the body count. The clerics will almost certainly strike back unless Washington uses overwhelming, paralyzing force.”

For the neocons and their partners in U.S. global reach, talk is cheap and counterproductive. Diplomacy with evil regimes is appeasement, they say. Instead, some of the leading neocons

call for a regime-change strategy that involves surrogate freedom fighters and preventive war.

One of the lessons of the Iraq War is that we all should listen closely to what the neocons are saying and planning because, once again, it may be that that they are talking about our future.

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Thomas Donnelly

Reuel Gerecht

Raymond Tanter

Iran Policy Committee

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