

Raising the Rhetoric on Iran

By Gareth Porter | January, 2007

Even before Defense Secretary Robert Gates visited Afghanistan this week and issued harsh words about Iranian activities in the Middle East, President George W. Bush, in his recent address to the nation, argued for an aggressive policy of taking direct action against alleged Iranian “networks” involved in attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq. Combined with the deployment of a second carrier group off Iran’s coast, the heated rhetoric raised speculation that an attack was in the works.

But the revelation by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that the campaign against Iranian officials had already been in effect for several months before Bush’s speech last Wednesday indicates that the new rhetoric is aimed at serving the White House’s desperate need to shift the blame for its failure in Iraq to Iran and to appear to be taking tough action.

Rice told the *New York Times* in an interview last Friday that Bush had ordered the U.S. military to target Iranian officials in Iraq allegedly linked to attacks on U.S. forces some time last fall. Bush and Rice had previously created the impression that the administration had launched a new initiative against Iran in connection with its recent troop surge idea for Iraq.

Bush’s speech coincided with an attack by an unidentified U.S. military unit on the building used by Iranian consular officials in Irbil in northern Iraq. Six Iranian officials at the compound were seized, yet all indications are that the U.S. military has no real intelligence on any direct Iranian involvement in supplying lethal weapons to insurgents.

The statement issued by the U.S. military, but clearly written in the White House, said the detainees, who were not identified as Iranians, were “suspected of being closely tied to activities targeting Iraqi and coalition forces.” That statement suggests that the seizure was not based on any prior evidence of the officials’ complicity in insurgent attacks. U.S. troops also seized documents and computers, indicating that the attack was really nothing more than an intelligence operation, launched in the hope of finding some evidence that could be used against Iran.

The only other such U.S. military raid came in late December and targeted four Iranian officials visiting Baghdad at the invitation of Iraqi President Jalal Talabani.

That operation bore similar indications of being a fishing expedition against Iranians based on the suspicion that they were connected with the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

The initial rhetoric from Bush suggesting a possible intention to expand the Iraq war into Iran or Syria in response to alleged Iranian and Syrian support for anti-coalition insurgents had been followed by clarifications and new details that point to a very carefully calibrated propaganda offensive aimed at rallying his own political base.

Bush’s accusation in his January 10 speech that Iran and Syria are “allowing terrorists and insurgents to use their territory to move in and out of Iraq,” and the more specific reference to Iran as “providing material support for attacks on American troops,” seemed to hint at such a plan to expand the war across the board into Iran.

Rice seemed to be dropping even more pointed hints in television interviews last Thursday. On the NBC *Today* show, Rice vowed, on behalf of Bush, “[W]e are going to make certain that we disrupt activities that are endangering and killing our troops and that are destabilizing Iraq.” When asked if that meant “attacks inside Iran and Syria” were on the table, Rice responded that Bush “is not going to take options off the table.”

Rice went on to declare, “The Iranians need to know, and the Syrians need to know, that the United States is not finding it acceptable and is not going to simply tolerate their activities to try and harm our forces or to destabilize Iraq.”

Asked in an interview with “Fox and Friends” whether Bush’s speech could mean “going over the border to chase down those who are providing the technology and possibly the training,” Rice replied, “Well, I don’t want to speculate on what kinds of operations the United States

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may be engaged in.” Then she added, “But I think you will see that the United States is not going to simply stand idly by and let these activities continue.”

In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week, Rice refused to answer a question from Chairman Joe Biden (D-DE) on whether the president has the authority to conduct military missions in Iran without congressional approval. That provoked expressions of alarm from both Democratic and Republican senators. Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-NE) said the ambiguity reminded him of the Nixon administration’s policy toward Cambodia in 1970 during the Vietnam War.

Some analysts viewed Rice’s rhetoric as evidence of an administration plan to justify an air offensive against Iran on the basis of alleged Iranian complicity in attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq, rather than on the more abstract threat of Iranian progress toward a possible nuclear weapons capability.

But the careful wording used and the explicit caveats issued by administration officials belied the impression of menace against Iran that Bush and Rice had clearly sought to convey. Bush’s reference to the issue during his January 10 speech avoided any actual direct threat to Iran. Instead he said, “We will seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq.” That formulation was carefully chosen to limit the scope of U.S. actions.

The next day, even though Rice was provoking congressional fears of a wider war, the Bush team was qualifying that rhetoric in remarks to reporters by specifying that U.S. actions to stop the alleged Iranian interference in Iraq will be confined to Iraq itself. Gen. Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who is considered a full member of the Bush administration team, limited the threatened aggressive U.S. actions to “those who are physically present trying to do harm to our troops.”

He concluded, “We can take care of the security of our troops by doing the business we need to do inside of Iraq.”

And spokesman for the National Security Council Gordon Johndroe, after repeating the new line that the administration would “not tolerate outside interference in Iraq,” went on to say that the actions would be taken only inside Iraq, not across the border. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates also said last Friday the United States had no intention of going into Iranian territory.

The contrast between the general impression of steely resolve toward Iran conveyed by Bush and the unusual clarity about the limited geographical scope of the response points to a sophisticated two-level communications strategy prepared by the White House. For those who get their news from television, the message conveyed by Rice was one of effective action against Iranians who were supposedly causing harm to U.S. troops; for Congress and the media, the message conveyed to reporters was much more cautious.

The two-level communications strategy suggests, in turn, that the White House was acutely aware that a single message of menace toward Iran could have triggered a negative congressional response that would have defeated the purpose of the tough rhetorical line.

Ironically, therefore, the net effect of the new tough line toward Iran may actually have been to force the administration to admit, if only tacitly, that it is not free under present circumstances even to threaten to go to war against Iran.

Gareth Porter is a historian and national security policy analyst who writes for the Inter Press Service. His latest book is Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam (2005).

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