

A Tale of Two Interventions

By Jim Lobe | February 20, 2007

For several weeks, Washington has been abuzz with rumors that President George W. Bush is preparing to attack nuclear and other sites in Iran this spring—rumors deemed sufficiently credible that lawmakers from both parties are hastily preparing legislation precisely to prevent such an eventuality.

Among the growing number of recent signs suggesting U.S. preparations for military confrontation, as listed by former CIA officer Philip Giraldi in a recent edition of *American Conservative*, are: Bush's claim that Iran is supplying bombs to Shiite militias to kill U.S. soldiers in Iraq; the seizure of Iranian diplomatic and intelligence officials by U.S. forces in Iraq; the deployment of two aircraft carrier groups with a flotilla of minesweepers to the Persian Gulf; the supply of Patriot antimissile batteries to U.S. allies in the region; the unprecedented appointment of a navy admiral and former combat pilot as the head of Central Command; the "surge" of as many as 40,000 troops into Iraq; and persistent reports of U.S. covert operations inside Iran.

It seems clear that the administration has developed detailed plans for attacking Iran and is putting in place a formidable armada that has the means to carry out such plans without delay.

But if a decision has already been made, it appears that the faction that led the pro-war propaganda offensive in the run-up to the Iraq invasion and that has long favored "regime change" in Iraq—the neoconservatives—has either not been clued in, or more likely, believes that an attack on Iran is still some time off, if it takes place at all.

It is not that the neocons don't favor war with Iran if diplomatic and other means fail to achieve either regime change or, at the very least, Tehran's abandonment of its nuclear program. Neoconservatives, whose views on the Middle East generally span those of Israel's Likud Party and the extreme right, have long held that a nuclear-armed Iran is, in Bush's words, "unacceptable," and that preventing such an outcome may require military means. "The only way to forestall an Iranian nuke," wrote Joshua Muravchik, a leading neoconservative polemicist at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), in this month's *Foreign Service Journal*, "... is by military strikes to cripple the regime's nuclear program."

It is, rather, more the fact that the neoconservatives—who helped lead the yearlong propaganda campaign to rally the United States behind the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 with an admirable single-mindedness and urgency—appear far less focused on Iran. If such an attack is on Washington's near-term agenda, the neoconservatives have been decidedly off-message.

The contrast with the run-up to the Iraq War is instructive.

For a full year or more before the March 2003 invasion, the neocons and their major media outlets—notably, the *Weekly Standard*, the National Review Online, the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, the *New York Post*, and Fox News—kept up a virtually daily drumbeat of op-ed articles, television appearances, and selective leaks by their confreres within the administration with only one aim in mind: to persuade the public that Saddam Hussein must be ousted militarily.

As the invasion drew near, the AEI, the movement's de facto headquarters, drew scores of reporters to its weekly "black coffee briefings," where such neocon worthies as *Weekly Standard* editor William Kristol, then-Defense Policy Board chairman Richard Perle, former CIA director James Woolsey, and Iraq National Congress leader Ahmed Chalabi held forth on the evils of the Baathist regime and the regional implications of the forthcoming "liberation" of the Iraqi people.

Carefully orchestrated and coordinated with their comrades in the offices of Vice President Dick Cheney and former Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld, neocons were able to create a powerful media "echo chamber" that, by late 2002, centered entirely on Iraq and the supposed necessity of going to war, to the exclusion of almost everything else.

The neocons' discipline and focus on Iraq four years ago has been nowhere evident with respect to Iran over the

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past month. Judging by their writings and television appearances, they have seemed far more concerned with the growing public and congressional pressure to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq.

That has been the overriding preoccupation of the *Weekly Standard*, National Review Online, and the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page. Article after article has assailed turncoat Republicans, as well as “defeatist” Democrats, for opposing Bush’s plan to “surge” troop levels. The AEI has held four briefings on Iraq, compared to only one on Iran, in the past two months.

Despite the sharply rising tensions between Iran and the United States over the past month, for example, the lead editorials of several recent issues of the *Standard*—always a reliable indication of neocon priorities—were devoted to rallying lawmakers behind the surge.

That doesn’t mean that Iran is not a major concern—and ultimate target—of the neocons. Indeed, the cover story of last week’s *Standard*, “Iran’s Obsession with the Jews: Denying the Holocaust, Desiring Another One,” shows no hesitation in building up the case for eventual war against Tehran. But the same issue ran yet another story that illustrates the relative lack of urgency for war: “Sanctions Against Iran Would Work,” it was entitled, although its subtitle, “Too Bad They Won’t Be Tried,” hinted at a sense of inevitability regarding a future war.

Nonetheless, to the extent that neoconservatives, and their allies in the right-wing “Israel Lobby,” are addressing themselves to Iran policy at the moment, expanding and enforcing sanctions, rather than imminent war, appears to be the main message.

Indeed, Reuel Marc Gerecht and Gary Schmitt, AEI fellows and fixtures at the black coffee briefings four years ago, just published an article on precisely this theme in the *Financial Times*: “How the West Can Avert War With Iran.”

Similarly, alarmist television ads by the right-wing American Foreign Policy Council running recently on the major cable television networks in the Washington DC area warn viewers about Iran’s nuclear program, its status as “the world’s largest state-sponsor of terrorism,” and its president’s Holocaust denials and threats to “wipe Israel off the map.” But the ads conclude with the relatively anodyne exhortation: “Call the White House and tell them to enforce sanctions against Iran today.” Not exactly what one would expect on the eve of a military attack.

This tack may simply be a ruse to lull anti-war forces into complacency. Or it may reflect a fear that, given their record on Iraq, beating the drums for war against Iran may prove counterproductive. Or it may indicate that prominent neoconservatives have somehow lost touch with the hawks in the White House and Cheney’s office.

But it may also reflect the neocons’ assessment, based no doubt on inside information, that Bush—who spoke about U.S. policy on Afghanistan at AEI last Thursday—intends to play the diplomatic game a little longer.

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