

Elliott Abrams' Repeat Performance

By Jim Lobe | April 17, 2007

It has an all too familiar ring to it. A crisis area—in this case, the Middle East—finds itself in desperate need of a peace process capable of tamping down the forces of violence and destabilization that the United States itself has played a central role in unleashing.

Regional efforts at diplomacy—in this case, led by Saudi Arabia—gain some momentum but are frustrated by diehard hawks in a U.S. administration. While increasing on the defensive both at home and abroad, the hawks are determined to carry through their strategy of isolating and destabilizing a hostile target—in this case, Syria—despite its oft-repeated eagerness to engage Washington and its regional allies.

Sensing an increasingly dangerous impasse, the Democratic Speaker of the House of Representatives—in this case, Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), backed by a growing bipartisan consensus that the administration's intransigence will further reduce already-waning U.S. influence in the region—tries to encourage regional peace efforts by engaging the target directly.

But worried that the quest might actually gain momentum, administration hawks—in this case, led by Deputy National Security Adviser Elliott Abrams and Vice President Dick Cheney—accuse the Speaker of undermining the president. Working through obliging editorial writers at the *Washington Post*, among other sympathetic media including the *Wall Street Journal*, they attack the Speaker for “substitut[ing] her own foreign policy for that of a sitting Republican president.”

If that scenario sounds familiar, your foreign policy memory dates back at least to 1987, when, despite intensified regional peace-making efforts for which Costa Rican President Oscar Arias won that year's Nobel Peace Prize, the Ronald Reagan administration was persisting in its efforts to isolate and overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

It was then-House Speaker Jim Wright who, with the quiet encouragement of Republican realists, notably Reagan's White House chief of staff, Howard Baker, Secretary of State George Shultz, and his special Central America envoy, Philip Habib, sought to promote Arias' plan.

Like today's Republican realists on the Iraq Study Group (ISG), who have urged the Bush administration to engage rather than continue to isolate Syria, they understood that popular and congressional support for a “regime change” policy in Nicaragua was not sustainable and that Washington should seek a regional settlement on the most favorable terms available.

But Abrams, then assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs, worked assiduously with fellow hardliners in the White House and the Pentagon—just as he works today with Cheney's office—to torpedo both the Arias plan and Wright's efforts to advance it throughout the latter half of 1987.

As Abrams' then-assistant, Robert Kagan, the future neo-conservative heavy thinker, put it later: “Arias, more than any other Latin leader, single-handedly undid U.S. policy in Nicaragua.” And when he won the Nobel Prize, “All us of who thought it was important to get aid for the contras reacted with disgust, unbridled disgust.”

As part of their strategy, hardliners led by Abrams rejected appeals by Nicaragua for high-level talks, thus forcing Habib to resign by late summer and insisting—as they now do with Syria—that direct negotiations would serve only to legitimate Sandinistas and demoralize the contras.

In November 1987, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega came to Washington with a proposal for a ceasefire with the contras. After the administration refused to receive him, Wright, seeing an opportunity to jump-start a stalled peace process, attended a meeting at the Vatican Embassy in Washington at which Ortega asked his main domestic foe, Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, to mediate between the Sandinista government and the contras.

Wright's participation in the talks was seized by Abrams as the launching pad for a public attack on the Speaker. Interviewed by the *Washington Post* under the guise of an unnamed “senior administration official,” Abrams

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charged Wright with engaging in “guerrilla theater” and “an unbelievable melodrama” that had dealt a “serious setback” to the administration’s policy.

“This was not forward movement; this was screwing up the process,” the “senior official” complained to the *Post*, which, as in its criticism last Friday of Pelosi’s meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, obligingly followed up with its own editorial, entitled “What is Jim Wright Doing?”, charging the Speaker with having acted “as though the actual conduct of diplomacy in this delicate passage were his responsibility.”

The *Wall Street Journal*’s neoconservative editorial writers swiftly joined in, accusing Wright of a “compulsion for running off-the-shelf foreign-policy operations,” just as last week they charged Pelosi and Democrats of seeking “to conduct their own independent diplomacy.”

Within just a few months of his meeting with Ortega, however, the Democratic-led Congress rejected Reagan’s request to fund the contras, a step that Abrams incorrectly predicted at the time would result in “the dissolution of Central America.”

According to *Banana Diplomacy*, Roy Gutman’s aptly named 1988 book about Reagan’s Central America policy, Washington soon found itself “at the margins of the region’s diplomacy.”

Unlike his high-profile role as assistant secretary 20 years ago, Abrams, who now presides over Middle East policy at the National Security Council, is today far more discreet, no doubt in part because his 1991 conviction for lying to Congress about his role in the Iran-contra scandal has made him an easy target for Democrats.

“He’s very careful about not leaving fingerprints,” one State Department official told the Inter Press Service earlier this year.

But there is little doubt among Middle East analysts in Washington that Abrams is playing a lead role in White House efforts to discredit Pelosi for meeting with Assad, just as he did with Wright for meeting with Ortega in 1987.

And just as he worked with Reagan hardliners to undermine the Arias plan 20 years ago, so too he appears to be doing what he can to undermine recent efforts by Saudi King Abdullah to initiate an Arab-Israeli peace process and, for that matter, by Republican realists, and even Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, to push it forward.

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