

Congress and Iran: The New Iraq?

By John Isaacs | October 31, 2007

The drumbeat of a possible march to war with Iran reached a new intensity in recent weeks. Although the campaign is led by President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, cheerleaders in Congress and the conservative community—with no small assistance from Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his inflammatory rhetoric—are aiding and abetting.

While the Iraq War continues into its fifth year as a debilitating quagmire, with Democrats lacking the votes to bring U.S. soldiers home, the war debate has shifted to Iran. Congressional hardliners offer amendments to bills to show how tough they are toward Ahmadinejad, and few Democrats are willing to vote “no.”

Meanwhile, Republican presidential candidates are eagerly trying to outhawk each other with statements regarding Iran. The Democratic candidates have gotten into the act too, although they are competing to show who is most open to a diplomatic solution, rather than war.

If U.S. warplanes fly toward Iran next year, October 2007 may be remembered as the month that the Bush administration began its final push to prepare the American public for a new conflagration in the Middle East. To many, it looked like the 2002 run-up to the attack against Iraq. As Yogi Berra said, it’s “déjà vu all over again.”

The most powerful bully pulpit for war belongs to Bush and Cheney. At an October 18 press conference, Bush warned that a confrontation with Iran could lead to World War III. This dangerously reckless rhetoric was followed a few days later by Cheney warning during a speech at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy of “serious consequences”—code for a U.S. attack on Iran—if the Iranian government does not shape up: “The Iranian regime needs to know that if it stays on its present course, the international community is prepared to impose serious consequences. The United States joins other nations in sending a clear

message: We will not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon” (“Vice President’s Remarks to the Washington Institute of Near East Policy,” October 21, 2007).

While administration officials claim that diplomacy remains the preferred outcome, they said the same thing in 2002 and 2003. The Bush administration’s commitment to diplomacy appears to extend no further than a willingness to accept Iranian surrender without firing a shot.

The administration’s veiled threat to launch war echoes from some of the same people who brought us the Iraq War in 2003. Norman Podhoretz, the neoconservative icon who reportedly has the ear of the president and advises the Giuliani presidential campaign, advocates force against Iran. He put his private recommendations to the president into a June 2007 article, bluntly entitled “The Case for Bombing Iran.” Podhoretz wrote: “The plain and brutal truth is that if Iran is to be prevented from developing a nuclear arsenal, there is no alternative to the actual use of military force—any more than there was an alternative to force if Hitler was to be stopped in 1938” (*Commentary*, June 2007).

A favored tactic among neoconservatives is comparing Ahmadinejad to Adolf Hitler—implying that not taking aggressive action against Iran would be akin to letting Nazis run free. *Newsweek* editor Fareed Zakaria effectively challenged this approach, pointing out that Iran’s annual military budget of around \$4.8 billion is miniscule in comparison to the U.S. defense budget of \$670 billion. “And yet we are to believe that Tehran is about to overturn

the international system and replace it with an Islamo-fascist order?” Zakaria asks. “What planet are we on?” (*Newsweek*, October 29, 2007).

Yet the voices for action against Iran grow louder. One loud pro-war voice belongs to John Bolton, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Bolton rejects the recommendation of the Iraq Study Group (the “Baker-Hamilton Commission”) that the United States conduct serious negotiations with Iran and Syria. In a September 27, 2007 *National Review* online article, Bolton is quoted as arguing for direct action to remove the regime in Tehran rather than attempting any kind of diplomacy. (Bolton is also helping to organize Republican opposition to the promising Bush administration agreement with North Korea to disable its nuclear facilities.)

Bush allies are now putting financial muscle behind such arguments. Two former senior White House officials are leading a new right-wing cheerleading outfit called Freedom’s Watch, which hopes to raise \$200 million to defend war No. 1 with Iraq and to promote war No. 2 with Iran. The president of Freedom’s Watch is Bradley Blakeman, a former deputy assistant in the Bush administration in charge of scheduling and appointments; former White House press secretary Ari Fleischer is a Freedom’s Watch founder. According to the *New York Times*, the idea for the group was hatched at a winter meeting of the Republican Jewish Coalition, where Cheney was the keynote speaker (Don Van Atta, “Big Coffers and a Rising Voice Lift a New Conservative Group,” September 30, 2007).

After promoting the administration’s war policies in a September newspaper ad blitz that buttressed the Petraeus-Crocker “things are going swimmingly” Iraq offensive, Freedom’s Watch began turning its attention to Iran. When Ahmadinejad spoke at Columbia University at the invitation of university president Lee Bollinger, Freedom’s Watch swung into action with a full-page ad demonizing the Iranian president, a man who needs little demonizing. Once again, Hitler was used to hype the threat.

Adding to the pro-war onslaught is the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), a reincarnated Cold

Warrior organization that was quite powerful in the 1970s at opposing nuclear arms control agreements with the Soviet Union. The new CPD is headed by former Secretary of State George Shultz (who wrote early in 2007 in favor of a “world free of nuclear weapons”) and former CIA Director James Woolsey. Honorary co-sponsors are Sen. Joseph Lieberman (I-CT) and Sen. John Kyl (R-AZ). In an October 18 paper, the CPD warned that, despite intelligence estimates that Iran is a number of years away from a nuclear bomb, Iran could actually field a nuclear weapon by sometime next fall—or even earlier.

Although many neocons are pushing for action on Iran, others may have been chastened by the disastrous results of the Iraq War. The Center for Security Policy’s Frank Gaffney, who never met a weapon system he didn’t like, has called for caution before using force. In a recent *Newsweek* article, Gaffney is quoted as saying: “We know there’s broad and deep popular support for our side in Iran,” Gaffney says. But bombing nuclear sites there not only isn’t practical, it “would almost certainly drive the population into the arms of the [radical] mullahs” (Jonathan Alter, “Before We Bomb Iran ...,” *Newsweek*, October 22, 2007).

The road to another war in the Middle East is also being paved by a number of members of Congress. Some of the biggest war promoters include Kyl, Lieberman, and Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-AL). The most widely noted provision was a Kyl-Lieberman amendment to the Defense Authorization Bill that urged the Bush administration to declare the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps a terrorist organization. The amendment was approved 76-22 on September 26. An earlier version of the amendment went further by urging the administration to consider all options, including military force, to stop Iran’s intervention in Iraq. These provisions were dropped before final passage.

When he offered the amendment on September 24, Lieberman argued that the amendment was necessary to: “Send a clear message to our allies in the region that the United States will not stand idly by and allow Iranian-backed terrorists to kill hundreds of American soldiers. We will not stand idly by and

allow Iran, through its proxies and then directly, to dominate Iraq.”

Kyl added that the amendment should not be read as an authorization to take military action against Iran. On the contrary, he argued, he and Lieberman were offering measures to prevent war.

Sen. Jim Webb (D-VA) was the most passionate opponent of the Kyl-Lieberman amendment. The freshman senator, a Vietnam War veteran, pointed out that U.S. soldiers in Vietnam also faced enemies with weapons supplied by outsiders, including China and Eastern European countries. He accused the amendment’s authors “for all practical purposes mandating the military option [that] could be tantamount to a declaration of war.” Webb added: “Those who regret their vote five years ago to authorize action in Iraq should think hard before supporting this approach.”

Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL), who ultimately voted for the amendment, spoke against the original version. Sen. Robert Byrd (D-WV) and Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) have introduced legislation this year to hinder an attack against Iran.

Even after modification, Webb still argued that the amendment could become “a de facto authorization” for military force against Iran. Webb’s arguments managed to attract the support of a number of senators—not including Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY)—but still the amendment passed overwhelmingly. A month later, Bush declared an element of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organization.

The Kyl-Lieberman amendment was just one of a series of anti-Iran amendments. On September 6, the Senate adopted by unanimous consent a Lieberman amendment to add funds to the Foreign Operations bill to support so-called democracy promotion activities in Iran.

On July 11, another Lieberman amendment accusing the Iranians of military intervention in Iraq that had resulted in the deaths of Americans was adopted 97-0. The next day, Sessions offered an

amendment linking two of his pet causes, missile defense and Iran. His amendment declared it U.S. policy to deploy a missile defense to protect against the Iranian missile threat “as soon as technologically possible.” The amendment was approved 90-5.

The House of Representatives, moving in a different direction, overwhelmingly approved several measures that increased economic sanctions against Iran. In one instance, the House voted 415-11 for a bill that authorized sanctions against companies investing in Iran’s energy sector.

Republican presidential candidates have added to the cacophony. Earlier in the spring, Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) sang to an audience in South Carolina: “Bomb, bomb, bomb ... bomb, bomb Iran” to the tune of the old Beach Boys’ hit “Barbara Ann.” In an October 9 debate, McCain suggested that war with Iran is closer to reality than most people knew.

Both former governor of Massachusetts Mitt Romney and former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, neither of whom has any particular foreign policy experience, have competed with bellicose statements toward Iran. Romney said on October 25 that he was open to a “bombardment of some kind” to block an Iranian nuclear weapons program. Romney has also bragged that when former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami spoke at Harvard, then-Governor Romney refused to provide security or any state services.

Giuliani has promised to take military action as president to prevent Iran from building a nuclear bomb. He told the “National Rally to End the Threat Now,” sponsored by Jewish organizations and held to protest Ahmadinejad’s Columbia visit: “We will not allow a nuclear Iran. Period. We will work with our allies and use every tool at our disposal to stop Iran from becoming a nuclear power. That is not a threat. It’s a promise.”

Only Republican presidential candidate Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX) has opposed war with Iran as he has opposed the war in Iraq.

The dynamic in the Democratic contest for the nomination is the exception to the rule. Each of the Democrats has endorsed negotiations with Iran that the Bush administration has avoided like a plague, and each has also cautioned against war. However, they have split over Senator Clinton's vote for the Kyl-Lieberman amendment, with all the other candidates attacking her.

Iowa is considered the key event in the Democratic nomination battle, with three candidates—Clinton, Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL), and former Sen. John Edwards (D-NC) all contending to win the caucuses. Obama, Clinton's major Democratic opponent, has been particularly critical of Clinton for not having learned her lesson from when she voted to authorize force against Iraq in 2002. In a mailer delivered to Iowa Democratic households, Obama called the amendment "dangerous" and accused Clinton of giving the Bush-Cheney policies the benefit of the doubt once again. The attacks drew sufficient blood that Clinton responded with her own mailer to Iowa voters.

Those opposed to military action against Iran include some active duty military members who think war with Iran, while U.S. forces are already stretched thin in Iraq and Afghanistan, is the height of folly. Investigative reporter Seymour Hersh has written extensively of these views in the *New*

Yorker. The new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Michael Mullen, appeared to confirm these views when he told a Washington audience on October 25 that diplomacy should be emphasized with Iran and that military force should be "a last option." He reminded his audience of the risks of engaging in another conflict in the region.

In addition, retired Army Gen. John Abizaid, who headed the Central Command, suggested that exaggerated rhetoric about Iran ignores the fact that a nuclear-armed Iran could be deterred just as the Soviets were deterred during the Cold War. He pointed out that "Iran is not a suicide nation," a counterpoint to pro-war forces that suggest the Iranian leadership is not rational and that only force can prevent an Iranian nuclear attack on Israel, Europe, or the United States.

But whatever the generals believe, whatever the Democratic politicians argue, and whatever the public fears, Bush will be commander-in-chief for 15 more months, and he is the only one who can give the order to launch the bombers. This October may have been the turning point in that direction; let us hope otherwise.

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