

The Warpath to Regime Change

By Gareth Porter | November 6, 2007

Vice President Dick Cheney and his neoconservative allies in the George W. Bush administration only began agitating for the use of military force against Iran once they had finally given up the illusion that regime change in Iran would happen without it.

And they did not give it up until late 2005, according to a former high-level Foreign Service officer who participated in U.S. discussions with Iran from 2001 until late 2005.

Hillary Mann, who was the director for Persian Gulf and Afghanistan Affairs on the National Security Council (NSC) staff in 2003 and later on the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, told the Inter Press Service (IPS) in a recent interview that the key to neoconservative policy views on Iran until 2006 was the firm belief that one of the consequences of a successful display of U.S. military force in Iraq would be to shake the foundations of the Iranian regime.

That central belief was conveyed to conservative columnist Arnaud de Borchgrave of the *Washington Times* in April 2002 by prominent neoconservative figures who told him the Bush administration "had decided to redraw the geopolitical map of the Middle East," he wrote later.

The Bush doctrine of preemption, they told him, "had become the vehicle for driving axis of evil practitioners out of power." The removal of Saddam Hussein, according to this scenario, would bring a democratic Iraq that would then spread through the region, "bringing democracy from Syria to Egypt and to the sheikhdoms, emirates, and monarchies of the Gulf."

Under the influence of this central myth, after the 9/11 attacks, some of Cheney's allies in the Pentagon conceived the objective of removing every regime in the Middle East that was hostile to the United States and Israel.

In November 2001, Gen. Wesley Clark, who had then recently retired from his post as head of the U.S. Southern Command, learned from a general he knew in the Pentagon that a memo had just come down from the office of the secretary of defense outlining the objective of the "take down" of seven Middle Eastern regimes over five years.

The plan would start with the invasion of Iraq, and then target Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, and Sudan, according to an account in Clark's 2003 book, *Winning Modern Wars: Iraq, Terrorism, and the American Empire*. The memo

indicated the plan was to "come back and get Iran in five years."

The neoconservatives were particularly serious about going after Syria. In the weeks following the initial U.S. invasion of Iraq, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, the chief neoconservative architect of the Iraq invasion, argued unsuccessfully for taking advantage of the presumed military triumph there to overthrow the Syrian regime of President Bashar Assad, according to an account from the right-leaning *Insight* magazine.

But contrary to the popular notion that the neoconservatives believed that "real men go to Tehran," no one was yet proposing that Iran should be the military target.

In September 2003, Cheney brought in David Wurmser (a close friend and protégé of Richard Perle and one of the key proponents of the plan for regime change in Iraq) as his adviser on the Middle East. Wurmser had previously articulated very specific ideas about how taking down Hussein by force would help destabilize the Iranian regime.

In a 1999 book, Wurmser had laid out a plan for using the Iraqi Shiite majority and their conservative clerics as U.S. allies in the "regional rollback of Shi'ite fundamentalism"—meaning the Islamic regime in Iran.

But Wurmser also believed that the Baathist regime in Syria was an obstacle to regime change in Iran. Beginning with the 1996 "Clean Break" memo, written by Wurmser with the help of other future Bush administration figures like Perle and Douglas Feith for the then-incoming Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Wurmser had argued that once Hussein was removed, the next step was to take down the Assad regime in Syria.

In a September 2007 interview with *The Telegraph*, a few months after he had left Cheney's office, Wurmser confirmed his belief that regime change in Syria—by force, if necessary—would directly affect the stability of the Tehran regime. If Iran were seen to be unable to do anything to prevent the overthrow of the regime in Syria, he suggested,

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it would seriously undermine the Islamic regime's prestige at home.

From 2003 to 2005, Wurmser and his neoconservative colleagues were in denial about the increasingly obvious reality that the U.S. occupation of Iraq was actually boosting Iranian influence there rather than shaking the regime's power at home, according to former NSC specialist Mann. She was well acquainted with the neoconservatives' thinking from her associations with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in the 1990s, and she told IPS that she was "astounded" to hear neoconservatives in the administration suggest as late as 2005 that the situation in Iraq was on track to help destabilize the Iranian regime.

The neoconservatives had long viewed the Iranian reformists, led by President Mohammed Khatami, as the primary obstacle to the popular revolution against the mullahs for which they were working. As French Iran specialist Frédéric Tellier noted in an early 2006 essay, they believed the electoral defeats of the reformists in 2003 and 2004 would also help open the way to a revolutionary political upheaval in Tehran.

In an appearance on the Don Imus show on January 21, 2005, Cheney said the Israelis might attack Iran's nuclear sites if they became convinced the Iranians had a "significant nuclear capability." That remark underlined the fact that Cheney was not thinking seriously about a U.S. strike against Iran.

By the end of 2005, however, the neoconservatives had finally accepted the reality of the failure of the Bush administration's military intervention in Iraq, according to Mann. She also notes that the electoral victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, representing a new breed of nationalist conservative with a mass base of popular support, in Iran's June 2005 presidential election, spelled the "death knell" to the neoconservative optimism about regime change in Iran.

Mann observes that the neoconservatives had never foresworn the use of force against Iran, but they had

argued that less force would be needed in Iran than had been used in Iraq. By early 2006, however, that assumption was being discarded by prominent neoconservatives.

Reuel Marc Gerecht of the American Enterprise Institute had been more aggressive than anyone else in arguing that Iraq's Shiites, liberated by U.S. military power, would help subvert the Iranian regime. But in April 2006, he called in a *Weekly Standard* article for continued bombing of Iran's nuclear sites until the Iranians stopped rebuilding them.

Within the administration, meanwhile, Wurmser was looking for the opportunity to propose a military option against Iran. In his September 2007 interview with *The Telegraph*, he insisted that the United States must be willing to "escalate as far as we need to go to topple the [Iranian] regime if necessary."

That opportunity seemed to present itself in the aftermath of Israel's failed attempt to deal a major blow to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon in the summer of 2006.

Neoconservatives aligned with Cheney argued that Iran was now threatening U.S. dominant position in the region through its proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, and the Palestinian territory, as well as with its nuclear program. They insisted the administration had to push back by targeting Iran's Quds Force personnel in Iraq, increasing naval presence in the Gulf, and accusing Iran of supporting the killing of U.S. troops.

Although the ostensible rationale was to pressure Iran to back down on the nuclear issue, in light of the previous views, it appears that they were hoping to use military power against Iran to accomplish their original goal of regime change.

Gareth Porter is a historian and national security policy analyst. His latest book, Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam, was published in June 2005.

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