

# Iran Falling into the “Net” of a “Worldwide Policy”: On the U.S. Foreign Policy Doctrine and Its Present Dangers

Exclusive Interview with William R. Polk

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*A former high-ranking member in the foreign and security policy staff of U.S. President John F. Kennedy and most recently the foreign policy advisor of Democratic Congressman Dennis Kucinich's presidential bid, Dr. William Polk talks to Ali Fathollah-Nejad on the neoconservative momentum in his country's foreign policy, on terrorism, and on the danger of war on Iran.*

*How can the U.S. foreign policy objective vis-à-vis Iran be summarized? What is the common denominator?*

I think it is a complicated issue really, because it is partly an aspect of American attitude toward Israel, partly an aspect of the attitude toward Iraq, but is also much influenced by the general drift which was set up the neoconservative movement dealing with America's role in the world. I go into that in some detail in the last book I did called *Violent Politics* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2007) and also the book I did with former Senator George McGovern on the Iraq issue entitled *Out of Iraq - A Practical Plan for Withdrawal Now* (Simon & Schuster, 2006).

This reformulation of American policy started over a decade ago with Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz asserting an American role as the world's policeman. They sought to reconstitute various other countries according to, as they described it, American national interest. They proposed that America assume the right to attack other nations and to change their regimes. This was not a theoretical or academic exercise, but it was encapsulated in the U.S. national security policy.

The basic idea is that America assumes the right to intervene anywhere in the world, not only where it regards enemies operating against it, but where the United States feels that other countries or movements might rival its power. This policy was effected by former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld when he created an organization called the »Special Operations Command« which was set up in Florida with 53,000 men and last year's budget (FY 2008) of 8 billion dollars, Rumsfeld asserted the right to station American special forces - »special op's forces« as they are called - anywhere in the world to assassinate enemies, overthrow governments, and otherwise engage in acts of war and not be under the supervision of Congress or the designated American representatives abroad - the ambassadors - but to operate solely under the discretion of the Secretary of Defense. And

this operation actually exists today. I have described it as being a “loose cannon” for American policy.

### **All Attention is Focused on Iran**

So this is a whole new drift of American affairs that is not focused only on Iran or only on Iraq, but takes up Somalia, Pakistan, India, where we have some of these people (special op's) now operating, and Latin America. It is a worldwide policy. In so far as it is evident in various other places, you can see already 737 American bases have been created around the world, so that Iran fell – if you will – into the net of this general policy.

As for Iran *per se*, there are two things that American attention has been focused upon that substantiated and build the possibility of such a policy. One is the hostage issue at the American embassy [in Tehran] which has left a very deep and still raw scar on American public opinion. Throughout America people still mention that.

The other thing is Islam. Americans generally, and certainly the government, have adopted the idea that Islam *per se* and Muslims *per se* are American enemies. People like my former Harvard University colleague Samuel Huntington have made a great issue out of this “clash of cultures.”

So most Americans today believe that Iran is a major leader in the struggle against America and that Iran is funding and arming opposition to America in Iraq and doing the same against Israel through the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon. No one remembers that Iran was helpful in trying to solve the Afghan problem. No one even knows about what Iran has done to try to stop the flow of drugs. Actually trying to interdict the flow of goods across its territory from Afghanistan and Pakistan Iran has lost as many as soldiers as America has lost in the Iraq War. The statistics are totally unknown about these things anywhere. Iran has been singled out as part of the – as President George W. Bush put it – «axis of evils» and of course now it is virtually the only one left because Iraq has been incapacitated and North Korea has achieved immunity because it actually has nuclear weapons. So all attention is focused on Iran.

I have been calling attention for the last three years to the build-up toward war on Iran. What seems, at least temporarily, to have stopped this is the publication of the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) in December 2007 showing that Iran had not been working on nuclear weapons for some period of time and had no “operational plans” to acquire them.

Frankly I don't believe that. If I were an Iranian, I would certainly be working on nuclear weapons or trying to acquire them somewhere because that is the only sure way that any country can defend itself.

The only way to discourage this move, I believe, is a serious move toward nuclear disarmament. We began that effort when I was in government in the 1960s. But we did not carry through. We should recommence that effort. I feel this particularly strongly as I was deeply involved, as a member of the Crisis Management Committee during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. That experience left permanent scars on me, as you can imagine.

One thing certainly then became clear: there is no constructive purpose ever served by nuclear weapons. Any nuclear weapon anywhere in the world is a mortal danger to everyone everywhere. After all, it only takes one nuclear weapon to create almost unimaginable horror and, if one nuclear weapon is used, it will certainly trigger the use of other nuclear

weapons.

Having come so close as my government did – in the little group I was associated with and monitored – and later learning how close the Russians had come to the total destruction of the world, I deeply believe that we must prevent even the possibility of their use. We can be sure of that only by eliminating them.

The Iranian government is not helpful about these things, to be frank. I have dealt a lot with the Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations, Mr. Javad Zarif, in the past. He has recommended for example, when I started thinking about writing the book on which I am engaged – on Iranian-American relations – that I can go and talk to people in the Iranian government. They refused, they are not talking to anybody that I can find outside, not matter who they are.

*They seem to be afraid in such a tense situation to speak frankly with you, aren't they?*

There is reason to be afraid, I understand that. But if we are to make any kinds of steps toward resolving this crisis there must be some degree of exchange. It would be helpful to them, I would argue. That is because I am going to write this book and I lecture all over America and speak to the Congress. So it would be useful to talk with responsible Iranians.

The other inhibition on Iranians is that many aspects of the Iranian government policy are not attractive. There are of course similar aspects of other governments that are not attractive, to which we pay no attention. But Iran is under the spotlight.

And since the European Union has been willfully ignorant and weak, hardly having an independent voice in these things the American government has had no real constraints or even other views on its activity. It more or less did what the Vice-President and the Secretary of Defense wanted it to do.

### **Nobody Is Giving a Damn About Illegality**

The Israelis and the American neoconservative movement have been pushing very hard to precipitate an attack on Iran for years, going back indeed to the 1990s. Today I think they have less real power although for example the “surge” in Iraq was designed by Frederick W. Kagan, one of the neoconservative leaders. The neoconservatives remain extremely active in the so-called think-tanks, the newspapers, and the various publications. They are still unrepentant about what they got us into in Iraq and they are perfectly prepared to get us into Iran.

I have responded to this policy by trying to show that a war on Iran would be greater disaster than the war on Iraq. I have tried successively to pick up the theme of illegality – which I find nobody really understands or is very interested in – the horrific cost to the Iranians that this would cause as it is caused in Iraq. Nobody gives a damn about that. The cost to American troops which surprisingly is not very much attended either because most of the young people we send overseas have been the “disadvantaged” or as a man in one of my audiences put it, the dregs of the our society. Lured into service by large bonuses, they are virtually a mercenary army. I think many people have said frankly that if they were not in Iraq, they would be in American prisons. So that has not been very useful.

But to what I have finally come cynically, I confess, to the belief that the only thing that really counts is the monetary cost. So I focused in the oil issue – the price of oil, the possible

results of the close-down of the 8 percent of energy that Iran directly produces, and the 40 percent of the world's energy that flows down the Persian Gulf – and the rise of debt in America, 30 percent under the Bush administration, the borrowing abroad 2.3 trillion dollars of which 1 trillion dollars of government obligations is directly owned by China, the three or perhaps six or seven trillion dollars that war has cost the American economy and the many more trillions of dollars that American businesses have borrowed from overseas investors. I found that the thing that had finally begun to make some difference in the interest of audiences was the decline of the American property market, that finally – as Mark Twain long ago put it – “the most delicate organ in the human body is the pocketbook.” So that's my approach.

*Coming just back to what you have said initially. Can you confirm the thesis put forward by many that the U.S. drive towards waging war on Iran is intended to gain momentum against the so-called global “peer competitors”, i.e. China, Russia, the EU? Since if you look at the national security strategies and all other relevant papers, the objective is to deter those “peer competitors” from becoming serious rivals on the global stage and considering Iran's energy wealth and geostrategic positioning, how imperative is U.S. control over Iran? Is this also the rationale behind the neoconservatives' drive towards confronting Iran?*

I think there are two aspects to what you just said that need some refining. One of them is, I don't think that this is a “peer” issue. I think everyone in the administration believes that America is uniquely powerful and has the capacity to utterly destroy Iran if it chose to and to do so practically overnight, certainly to destroy the Iranian army and whatever scientific capacity it may have for development of weapons of mass destruction. Frankly speaking, I think the analysis behind this [peer competitor argument] is very crude. As an old policy-planner I find it appallingly amateurish, never mind whether one agrees with the philosophy behind it or not.

I think rather than that, the feeling is that if America should – as one of the neoconservatives said – “line them up against the wall and kick them” and a movement against Iran would demonstrate America's intent to be a tough, powerful figure on the world stage. That shows the resolution rather the capacity of a country to act. That would demonstrate to Pakistan, to Latin America – Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil, etc. – America's will, which I think is the more important issue. Secondly, to alleviate or stop any Iranian interference in Iraq...

*...for which there is no evidence until now. As far as I have observed, the United States administration has tried to change the rhetoric in the summer of 2007 because the image of the nuclear threat was not really credible if one read carefully the International Atomic Energy Agency's reports where it is said that there no evidence for any Iranian weaponization program. That was a try to rally the American public behind such a war effort saying that Iran was “interfering in Iraqi affairs” and “killing our soldiers” in that country.*

I think you are right, there is no clear evidence of effective Iranian armed interference in Iraq.

However, it seems to me that this misses one dimension which is worth considering carefully. I have always found that in my work on international affairs it is useful and important to try to put myself, as it were, on the other side of the table. Then I can imagine how I would act if I were the other person. So what does that suggest? If I were Iranian

president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, I would certainly be trying to make America's position in Iraq and Lebanon as difficult as I possibly could. Why not? I would then be acting rather like America under the Monroe Doctrine with the nations of Latin America, its neighbors as Iraq is mine. And I would certainly be trying to get a nuclear weapon. That is, I would follow North Korea to avoid being treated like Iraq. So I assume that this is a feasible objective for the government of Iran.

That insight raises the question of what you do about it and the answer essentially comes down to three possibilities: attack Iran and try to destroy it, which is the neoconservative and Israeli approach; or you try in various ways to make such an effort so expensive and so difficult for Iran that it backs off, which is essentially what we are trying to do right now with sanctions and various forms of economic pressure; the third possibility is to try to find out what is causing this movement toward acquisition of weapons and toward intervening in Iraq and Lebanon.

It seems to me that it is the third one that offers us a real possibility for peace. Because if we can admit we would do what Iran possibly is doing or presumptively could be doing, then we can begin to identify and evaluate what would make it attractive for them not to do that.

Where to begin? I don't think it takes any intelligence to see that the Iranians are in part reacting to the threat posed by the 2005 U.S. national security doctrine - which as far as I have been able to found out is still operative. That doctrine threatens Iran with destruction. As I said, if I were Iranian, it would make *me* seek to do what we fear Iran wants to do. Therefore instead of threatening to attack, we need to disavow this policy.

Once we have done that, and gotten other powers, especially Iran, to believe us, we can then begin to deal with the nuclear issue. The first step there is to cooperate with the Russians to begin to destroy nuclear weapons and move toward where we were with the nuclear disarmament actions at my time in government. This must be the first step because, as the responsible Indian government official put it, we cannot expect others to cut back unless we do; they will not accept a world of Asian "haves" and European "have-nots."

Beyond the nuclear issue, as we take the pressure off Iran, there is a possibility and indeed a probability that the moderating forces in Iranian society will have a chance to come to the fore. The current policy necessarily favors the more radical forces in the society and works to the disadvantage not only of Iran, but also of the United States and of course all the other countries. So we are going in exactly the opposite direction of where I think the policy should lead us.

*So does that mean that Iran's nuclear dossier should be sent back to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for not being anymore in such a politicized climate? If you observed the third round of sanctions, UN Security Council resolution 1803 from March 3, 2008, this was a sad exercise in international diplomacy when you see how much pressure was put upon the 10 non-permanent members by the 5 permanent ones, especially from Washington and Paris. Thus, at the end none of the four countries - Indonesia, Libya, South-Africa, Vietnam - that had signaled their intention to reject the resolution did so, so that the vote turned out to be quasi-unanimous with only Jakarta abstaining.*

*I am not sure if Iran can pursue a weaponization program without being caught by the IAEA, which is not an easy task to do. On the other hand I am not sure if Iran is not really interested in stability in Iraq. Its interference might not be so counterproductive to American*

*interests either, as some argue. Maybe all this leads to the conclusion that the nuclear crisis is just – as I put it – “a manufactured crisis.” An Iranian nuclear weapon is certainly perceived as a threat by Israel, but for the U.S. it is more feasible to deal with a nuclear-armed Iran.*

I think it is arguable that it does not really make any difference about Iranian nuclear weapons because let's say that Iran acquires one, five, or ten weapons, any hint that it would use those weapons would cause massive destruction in Iran so that anyone would have to be insane to use the weapons. We all have dealt with that problem repeatedly over the last 50 years. For Pakistan the use of the nuclear weapon against India is unthinkable and likewise *vice versa*, or for us to use it against Russia. Mutually assured destruction is maybe not a wholly satisfactory thing, but it does have some operational importance.

The one thing I detected in what you just said that I would be clear about it is that my experience in trying to think about policy is that you can't really single out a little piece and change that. We really have to think globally on what the policy is about. If we could think about how we could interface with Iran over the whole range of our relationships, then the nuclear issue becomes more manageable. As a single issue I don't think it is manageable.

*Do you also think the U.S. should give Iran a security guarantee, a reversal from the regime-change policy, which would really change a lot also inside Iran in coping with the U.S. This seems to be the main hurdle in all this.*

It is unlikely that any foreseeable American government would do that.

### **From the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire**

*So you don't also think that a future U.S. government might do that?*

I don't see anybody in American politics today moving in that direction, including Barack Obama, who also now says “all options are on the table, I mean all options.” If Obama is the liberal voice of America, that does not give you much ground for hope. What it seems to me has to happen is, first of all, an analysis of what it is really we are trying to achieve, secondly, what the forces are at work, and thirdly, how we can take a series of carefully graduated steps toward achieving them. I think a security guarantee at some point may be a useful thing, but in fact if the various steps that I can foresee actually come into being, then the security guarantee is not anymore of real importance. We don't give England a security guarantee for example.

*But the U.S. did not say that we are going to do regime change in London either?*

Exactly, but if you back off the neoconservative policy and begin to take a series of positive steps, you do not need a security guarantee. Therefore, the first thing that I would have us do is to revoke the 2005 U.S. national security doctrine...

*...which is in fact about Iran...*

Well, it covers the whole world and it covers it in a massive variety of forms of military intervention. It is a frightening document that is wholly out of the character of the traditional American political system. As a very old-fashioned American from a family that has been very much involved in American politics since before the Revolution<sup>[1]</sup>, I feel very much that we have changed course. It is almost a change from the Roman Republic to the Roman

Empire. This is a change that I deeply resent in our political system.

*What do you think about the prospect of creating a Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Near and Middle East, which would entail solving regional problems, but also creating a region void of weapons of mass destruction? Do you see the U.S. government willing to launch such an initiative?*

Frankly, I don't find much value in conferences. The ones that I have been involved in the past, the issues were really resolved before the conference. The conference itself was a kind of painting over, smoothing up, beautifying the results that had already been achieved. I think almost always conferences, particularly non-governmental conferences, are among the people who already agree with one another.

*I am more talking about regional structure building.*

I think this also is less valuable because if you really achieve the kind of movement that I suggested you don't need that structure very much. It may be that it is cosmetically valuable at some point, but it is not going to be the thing that is going to change the actions.

### **Terrorism is the weapon of the weak**

*So what would be the advice you would give to the U.S. administration at this time?*

The first would be you abolish the preemptive strike doctrine of 2005. The second thing would be to analyze what really is involved in the terror issue that is mesmerizing the American public and government. Terrorism is simply a tactic. We used terrorism in the American Revolution against the British. Every guerilla warfare and every insurgency has used terrorism. Terrorism is what people use when they do not have any other means of action. So when insurgent movements begin, that is what they can do. The Iraqi insurgence for example does not have the capacity to fight Apache helicopters, gunships, F-16s, tanks, and so forth. So what have they left? They have terrorism. They are going to use that because that is the only thing they have. Terrorism is the weapon of the weak. To say we have a "war on terrorism" is simply non-sense.

### **Bush's Gun-Slinging-Shoot-from-the-Hip Approach**

*And more specifically on Iran? As Zbigniew Brzezinski, Scott Ritter and others pointed out, there is a considerable probability that in the remaining months of the Bush Administration a war is being waged on Iran.*

I have been saying that for years. As I said, I think it is less likely now because of the 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate. Even more than what it said was the way it was brought public. Some people have regarded it as a kind of attack on the Bush administration itself by the intelligence organizations. The fact that it was published is a remarkable thing. In my times of government, those documents were regarded as secret. To produce one on such an issue and publicize tells you that there is something very peculiar about it. What it attempted to do was to tie the hands of the Bush administration so that it could not attack Iran. Various of my colleagues who are closer to the Pentagon than I am - Seymour Hersh for example from *The New Yorker* - think that it was kind of *coup d'état*. I do not know how much that could be substantiated, but certainly many people in the intelligence and some in the military who opposed the Bush policy have been pushed out of the government. It isn't

only government officials. The business community also is worried about the decline of the dollar and the decline of the American economy. Some openly talk about the gun-slinging-shoot-from-the-hip approach of the Bush Administration. That does not mean they are pro-Iranian, but that does mean that this is a very unprofessional and illogical set of actions.

*Also in the sense that an attack on Iran, as Zbigniew Brzezinski argues, would immensely shorten the era of American domination?*

I am not sure. Brzezinski and I do not agree on a great many things, although we are very old friends. I do not think that an attack on Iran would lessen American dominance, however if the attack were followed, as it is likely to be followed, by an actual invasion, then it would involve a guerrilla war that would be devastating to America. And as I mentioned, the effect on the world energy supply and price would be enormously devastating for the whole Western economy. I guess I have to say that I do agree with him about that issue.

*What about the so-called "Cheney Plan," the probability that after the NIE's release which makes an American attack on Iran less likely, but Israel seems to be still very much interested in a military confrontation? What about Israel striking first and the Americans coming to its aid?*

At least some of the Israelis were keen on striking first, as it were, pulling the trigger, but this presupposes that America would follow. The Israelis do not have the capacity to do more than begin the war. They would need America to carry on. They might try something like the Osirak attack in 1981. Since the Osirak episode, governments all over the world have followed the lead of Russia and the United States and have diversified their facilities to the point that it is almost impossible to think of a strike of that kind that would actually do anything more than accelerate the movement toward acquisition of nuclear weapons. The Israelis did have as for some months ago - I am not sure they still have - several nuclear submarines off the coast of Iran as a presumed warning to Iran that they had the capacity to destroy the country. But should Israel make a preemptive nuclear attack, I think it would be devastating to Israel itself. And the Israelis are not fools. They certainly understand is the cost of an aggressive war against Iran..

Whether they will do it or not, this government is very aggressive and extremely right-wing. I think it is not always attuned to Israel's own interest in the long-term. But that is really speculation. I do not know what they are likely to do, but I do not think that they would attack Iran unless the American government will give it "a green light."

*Concerning the presidential contenders John McCain and Barack Obama, it seems that McCain is very neo-con in his foreign policy stance, but Obama is at least willing to talk to those "rogue states", which Washington was not willing to do. Can one put it in those terms?*

I think you have to recognize that both candidates are determined to win the election and they are willing to say anything, and possibly even act on anything, that might get them the votes. So they are all going to cater to what they perceive to be the way to handle American political reaction. One of the curious things is that the public in general is very much opposed to the war. In the constituency of every Congressman, there is a small group of people that is vociferously in favor of it while opponents of the war are wishy-washy about it, so that although they are a very small minority in the overall, they are quite strong. In issues that have anything to do with Israel, there is of course a very strong lobby in America that is determined and active in every constituency. So Obama for example came out the



other day with a statement that in fact violated everything that he had been saying in the Middle East and I think this is just a characteristic of American politics. It is lamentable, it is disturbing, but it is like that.

### **War on Iran: Great and Present Danger**

*What do you make out of Obama and McCain's choices for their vice-presidential running-mates?*

To be frank: I think McCain made a disastrous choice. Governor Palin is a know-nothing person. She speaks to the lowest denominator of the American public. Obama's choice is better. But to have two senators, as the Obama team is, is weak in the sense that neither has administrative credentials. Biden has a record of listening to poor advice and is often inarticulate. Both could have done better. Biden is, at least, credible, but Palin would be terrifying in the position of being "a heartbeat away from the presidency."

*The chances that Obama will prevail in the presidential elections in November are quite good. Will an Obama-Biden Administration make a change in U.S. foreign policy in general and regarding Iran in particular? Are the American élites strongly in favor of an Obama presidency since the current has been harming their various interests by damaging America's image in the world?*

Here we are just guessing. We can hope with Obama. There is little hope with McCain.

*There is increasing speculation of a military action against Iran in the remaining Bush months? What do you think?*

I still think it is a great and present danger.

*Thank you.*

*William R. Polk was the member of the Policy Planning Council responsible for North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia from 1961 to 1965 and then professor of history at the University of Chicago where he founded the Middle Eastern Studies Center. He was also president of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. He is the author of a number of books on world affairs.*

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