

U.S. Iran Policy Irks Senior Commanders: The Military vs. Militaristic Civilian Leadership

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There is strong evidence that as the Bush administration is mulling over plans to bomb Iran, the simmering conflict between the high-ranking military professionals and the militaristic civilian leaders is bursting into open. The conflict, festering ever since the invasion of Iraq, has now been heightened over the administration's policy of an aerial military strike against Iran. While civilian militarists, headed by Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, are said to have drawn plans to bomb Iran, senior commanders are openly questioning the wisdom of such plans. [1]

The administration's recent statements that it is now willing to negotiate with Iran might appear as a change or modification of its plans to launch a military strike against that country. But a closer reading of those statements indicates otherwise: such pronouncements are premised on the condition that, as President Bush recently put it, "the Iranian regime fully and verifiably suspends its uranium enrichment." In light of the fact that suspension of uranium enrichment, which is nothing beyond Iran's legitimate rights under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), is supposed to be the main point of negotiation, Iran is asked, in effect, "to concede the main point of the negotiations before they started." [2]

Military professionals question the administration's plans of a bombing campaign against Iran on a number of grounds. For one thing, they doubt that, beyond a lot of death and destruction, the projected bombing raids can accomplish much, i.e., destroy Iran's nuclear program. For another, they caution that the bombing campaign could be very costly in terms of military, economic, and geopolitical interests of the United States in the region and beyond. More importantly, however, the professionals' opposition to the administration's bombing plans stems from the fact that, points out the renowned investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, "American and European intelligence agencies have not found specific evidence of clandestine [nuclear] activities or hidden facilities" in Iran. Hersh further writes, "A former senior intelligence official told me that people in the Pentagon were asking, 'What's the evidence? We've got a million tentacles out there, overt and covert, and these guys'-the Iranians-'have been working on this for eighteen years, and we have nothing? We're coming up with jack shit.'" [3]

So far, the jingoistic civilian leaders do not seem to have been swayed by the expert advice of their military experts. And the discord over Iran policy continues.

Some observers have attributed the conflict to Rumsfeld's uneasy relationship with the military hierarchy, arguing that his cavalier attitude and unwillingness to accept responsibility are the main reasons for the ongoing friction between the military and civilian

leadership. While there are clear elements of truth to this explanation, it leaves out some more fundamental reasons for the discord. There is a deeper and more general historical pattern—often shaped by the economics of war—to the recurring disagreements between the military and militaristic civilian leaders over issues of war and peace. Let me elaborate on this point.

Evidence shows that business or economic beneficiaries of war, who do not have to face direct combat and death, tend to be more jingoistic than professional military personnel who will have to face the horrors of warfare. Furthermore, military professionals tend to care more about the outcome of a war and “military honor” than civilian leaders who often represent some powerful economic interests that benefit from the business of war. Calling such business and/or ideologically-driven war mongers “civilian militarists,” military historian Alfred Vagts points to a number of historical instances of how civilian militarists’ eagerness to use military force for their nefarious interests often led “to an intensification of the horrors of warfare.” For example, he points out how in World War II “civilians not only anticipated war more eagerly than the professionals, but played a principal part in making combat . . . more terrible than was the current military wont or habit.” [4]

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq serves as another blatant example of civilian militarists’ instigation of war in pursuit of economic and geopolitical gains. A number of belatedly surfaced documents reveal that not only were the civilian militarists, representing powerful business and geopolitical interests, behind the invasion of Iraq, but that they also advocated a prolonged occupation of that country in order to avail their legal and economic “experts” the time needed to overhaul that country’s economy according to a restructuring plan that they had drawn up long before the invasion. One such document, titled “Moving the Iraqi Economy from Recovery to Growth,” was obtained from the State Department by the well-known investigative reporter Greg Palast. The document, also called the “Economy Plan,” was part of a largely secret program called “The Iraq Strategy.”

Here is how Palast describes the plan: “The Economy Plan goes boldly where no invasion plan has gone before: the complete rewrite, it says, of a conquered state’s ‘policies, laws and regulations.’ Here’s what you’ll find in the Plan: a highly detailed program . . . for imposing a new regime of low taxes on big business, and quick sales of Iraq’s banks and bridges—in fact, ‘ALL state enterprises’—to foreign operators. . . . Beginning on page 73, the secret drafters emphasized that Iraq would have to ‘privatize’ (i.e., sell off) its ‘oil and supporting industries.’” [5]

After a detailed account and analysis of the plan, Palast concludes, “If the Economy Plan reads like a Christmas wish-list drafted by U.S. corporate lobbyists, that’s because it was. From slashing taxes to wiping away Iraq’s tariffs (taxes on imports of U.S. and other foreign goods), the package carries the unmistakable fingerprints of the small, soft hands of Grover Norquist.”

Grover Norquist, once registered as a lobbyist for Microsoft and American Express, is one of many corporate lobbyists who helped shape the Economy Plan for the “new” Iraq. In an interview with Palast, Norquist boasted of moving freely at the Treasury, Defense and State Departments, and in the White House, “shaping the post-conquest economic plans....”

The Economy Plan’s “Annex D” laid out “a strict 360-day schedule for the free-market makeover of Iraq.” But General Jay Garner, the initially-designated ruler of Iraq, had

promised Iraqis they would have free and fair elections as soon as Saddam was toppled, preferably within 90 days. In the face of this conflict, civilian militarists of the Bush administration overruled General Garner: elections were postponed-as usual, on grounds that the local population and/or conditions were not yet ripe for elections. The real reason for the postponement, however, was that, as Palast points out, "It was simply inconceivable that any popularly elected government would let America write its laws and auction off the nation's crown jewel, its petroleum industry."

When Palast asked lobbyist Norquist about the postponement of the elections, he responded matter of factly: "The right to trade, property rights, these things are not to be determined by some democratic election." The troops would simply have to wait longer.

General Garner's resistance to the plan to postpone the elections was a major factor for his sudden replacement with Paul Bremmer who, having served as managing director of Kissinger Associates, better understood the corporate culture. Soon after assuming power in Saddam Hussein's old palace, Bremmer cancelled Garner's scheduled meeting of Iraq's tribal leaders that was called to plan national elections. Instead, he appointed the entire "government" himself. National elections, Bremmer pronounced, would have to wait until 2005. "The delay would, incidentally, provide," Palast notes, "time needed to lock in the laws, regulations and irreversible sales of assets in accordance with the Economy Plan. . . . Altogether, the leader of the Coalition Provisional Authority issued exactly 100 orders that remade Iraq in the image of the Economy Plan."

Palast's report is by no means an isolated or exceptional story. It is part of a historical pattern of how or why civilian militarists, often representing powerful interests of the beneficiaries of war, tend to be more belligerent than the professional military. The report also shows that, contrary to popular perceptions, the jingoistic neoconservative forces in and around the Bush administration are not simply a bunch of starry-eyed ideologues bent on "spreading U.S. values." More importantly, they represent influential economic and geopolitical interests that are camouflaged behind the façade of the neoconservatives' rhetoric and their alleged ideals of democracy.

There is clear evidence that the leading neoconservative figures have been long-time political activists who have worked through a network of war-mongering think tanks that are set up to serve either as the armaments lobby or the Israeli lobby or both. These corporate-backed militaristic think tanks include Project for the New American Century, the American Enterprise Institute, Center for Security Policy, Middle East Media Research Institute, Middle East Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, and National Institute for Public Policy. Major components of the Bush administration's foreign policy, including the war on Iraq, have been designed largely at the drawing boards of these think tanks, often in collaboration, directly or indirectly, with the Pentagon and the arms lobby. [6]

Even a cursory look at the records of these militaristic think tanks-their membership, their financial sources, their institutional structures, and the like-shows that they are set up to essentially serve as institutional fronts to camouflage the dubious relationship between the Pentagon, its major contractors, and the Israeli lobby, on the one hand, and the war-mongering neoconservative politicians, on the other. More critically, this unsavory relationship also shows that powerful interests that benefit from war are also essentially the same powers that can-and indeed do-make war. Additionally, it explains why civilian militarists are so eager to foment war and international tensions.

By the same token, the incestuous relationship between war beneficiaries and war makers goes some way to explain the increasing tensions between the military and civilian militarists in and around the Bush administration, especially in the context of the administration's plans to bomb Iran. When contemplating war plans, military commanders make some critically important decisions that seem to be of no or very little significance to civilian leaders. Not only the military will have to face direct combat, death, and destruction, but perhaps more importantly, the commanders will have to think very carefully about the outcome of the war and the chances of victory, that is, the of honor and pride of the military.

By contrast, the primary concern and the measure of success for civilian militarists lie in the mere act or continuation of war, as this would ensure increased military spending and higher dividends for military industries and war-induced businesses. In other words, the standard of success for corporate beneficiaries of war, which operate from behind the façade of neoconservative forces in and around the Bush administration, is based more on business profitability than on the conventional military success on the battle field. This is a clear indication of the fact that, for example, while from a military point of view the war on Iraq has been a fiasco, from the standpoint of the powerful beneficiaries of the Pentagon budget it has been a boon and a huge success. This explains, perhaps more than anything else, the ongoing tensions between the military and militaristic civilian leaders, or chicken hawks.

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