

# Why Bush won't attack Iran

By [Steven Clemons](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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*Despite saber-rattling, and the Washington buzz that a strike is coming, the president doesn't intend to bomb Iran. Cheney may have other ideas.*

Sep. 19, 2007 | During a recent high-powered Washington dinner party attended by 18 people, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft squared off across the table over whether President Bush will bomb [Iran](#).

Brzezinski, former national security advisor to President Carter, said he believed Bush's team had laid a track leading to a single course of action: a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities. Scowcroft, who was NSA to Presidents Ford and the first Bush, held out hope that the current President Bush would hold fire and not make an already disastrous situation for the U.S. in the Middle East even worse.

The 18 people at the party, including former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, then voted with a show of hands for either Brzezinski's or Scowcroft's position. Scowcroft got only two votes, including his own. Everyone else at the table shared Brzezinski's fear that a U.S. strike against Iran is around the corner.

In the national debate about America's next moves in the [Middle East](#), an irrepressible and perhaps irresponsible certainty that America will attack Iran now dominates commentary across the political spectrum. Nerves are further frayed by stories like [this one](#), about the Pentagon making a list of 2,000 military targets inside Iran.

The left — and much of the old-school, realist right — fears that Bush means to bomb Iran sometime between now and next spring. Both would like to rally public opinion against the strike before it happens. The neoconservative right, meanwhile, is asserting that we will bomb Iran but that we need to get to it posthaste.

But both sides are advancing scenarios that are politically useful to them, and both sides are wrong. Despite holding out a military option, ratcheting up tensions with Iran about meddling in [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#), and deploying carrier strike-force groups in the Persian Gulf, the president is not planning to bomb Iran. But there are several not-unrelated scenarios under which it might happen, if the neocon wing of the party, led by [Vice President Cheney](#), succeeds in reasserting itself, or if there is some kind of "accidental," perhaps contrived, confrontation.

One of the reasons so many believe action is near is the well-known neoconservative preference that it be so. There is still a strong neoconservative faction within the Bush team, and their movement allies outside the administration, such as Michael Ledeen, John Bolton and Norman Podhoretz, have openly advocated striking Iran before it can develop nuclear

weapons. The neoconservatives believe that in the end, Bush's team will indeed launch a military strike against Iran, or will nudge Israel to do so.

There is also evidence that the administration has given serious thought to the bombing option. In June 2006, I helped organize a [round table](#) on Iran for the [New America Foundation](#), where I work, that attracted some heavy hitters in the national security world, including some of the names associated with the Aspen Strategy Group co-chaired by Brent Scowcroft and former National Intelligence Council chairman and Harvard Kennedy School dean Joseph Nye. As at the Aspen Strategy Group, comments made in my session were on a "not for attribution" basis. Several current and former Bush administration officials were in attendance.

I moderated the session. The task of those participating was to think and talk through the "unthinkables." On the one hand, was an Iran with nukes so hard to live with that the potentially disastrous consequences of an attack, even if it negated Iran's nuclear gains, would be worth it? Would an Iran *with* nukes be less paranoid about its security and thus less prone to meddling in other countries, or would it use the nukes as a shield to protect itself while continuing to finance terrorism?

Alternatively, if we bombed Iran would we be prepared to cede American primacy over the world's fossil fuel regime and see Iran, China and Russia develop what Flynt Leverett [calls a "new axis of oil"](#)? Would we be prepared for a post-bombing terrorist superhighway to erupt from Iran and race through Iraq, Syria and Jordan to the edge of Israel? America might not just see its global geo-energy position undermined, but could see a set of falling dominoes among Sunni Arab states that could dramatically remake the map of the Middle East — and not in America's favor.

In other words, the task was to ponder what each of these bleak binary choices meant for America. They are often framed as "bombing" vs. "appeasement." The emerging polite term for the appeasement option is "strategic readjustment."

After the session, two Bush administration senior officials who were not present sent me letters, one to say the binary "to bomb or not to bomb" scenario was premature, the other to say it was not premature.

But a former administration official who was present at the session vigorously and emphatically embraced the either/or formula. He also had this to share about the inner workings of the Bush White House on Iran and the inevitability of military action:

The President is going to receive a memo — some time in the next 6 to 12 months — that presents a "bleak binary choice". Either he takes action to preempt Iran from reaching a nuclear threshold and calls for a military strike or he stands down and accepts a future with Iran with nuclear weapons.

Condi's job is to develop a "third option". She will dance round and round, waltzing with that third option. She will dance faster and faster with it, spinning and spinning, all around she'll go — but when she's done she'll see that she's dancing with a corpse.

This President is the kind of president who believes it is his moral responsibility to address serious problems now and not to leave these tough actions to a successor.

Those are the cold, harsh realities that we face — and to me, as I look ahead, I don't see how we come out of this without military action. Unless Iran abandons its nuclear weapons intentions, which I don't see happening, there will be a war.

So 15 months later, the president has now, presumably, received that memo, and those who hold the deterministic view that bombing Iran is around the corner could argue that they are in good company.

To try to discern what the president himself thinks, however, is very difficult. It's particularly hard when Bush is trying to convince Iran that the military option is real, and that if Iran doesn't work out a mutually acceptable deal with the U.S., he will launch a strike.

To date, however, nothing suggests Bush is really going to do it. If he were, he wouldn't be playing good cop/bad cop with Iran and proposing engagement. If the bombs were at the ready, Bush would be doing a lot more to prepare the nation and the military for a war far more consequential than the invasion of Iraq. There is also circumstantial evidence that he has decided bombing may be too costly a choice.

First, journalist Joe Klein [documents a December 2006 meeting](#) in which Bush met in “the Tank” with his senior national security counselors and the military's command staff and walked out with the impression that either the costs of military action against Iran were simply too high, or that the prospects for success for the mission too low.

Klein writes:

Then Bush asked about the possibility of a successful attack on Iran's nuclear capability. He was told that the U.S. could launch a devastating air attack on Iran's government and military, wiping out the Iranian air force, the command and control structure and some of the more obvious nuclear facilities. But the Chiefs were — once again — unanimously opposed to taking that course of action.

Why? Because our intelligence inside Iran is very sketchy. There was no way to be sure that we could take out all of Iran's nuclear facilities. Furthermore, the Chiefs warned, the Iranian response in Iraq and, quite possibly, in terrorist attacks on the U.S. could be devastating. Bush apparently took this advice to heart and went to Plan B — a covert destabilization campaign reported earlier this week by ABC News.

After this meeting, Bush immediately tilted away from the Cheney-dominant view that military action was the most preferable course and empowered and released other parts of his administration to animate a third option.

Secondly, we know via material first reported on my blog, [the Washington Note](#), and subsequently confirmed by the [New York Times](#), [Time](#) and [Newsweek](#), that Cheney and his team have been deeply frustrated by the “engage Iran team” that the president empowered and felt that they were losing ground to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell and the president's new chief of staff, Joshua Bolten.

One member of Cheney's national security staff, David Wurmser, worried out loud that

Cheney felt that his wing was “losing the policy argument on Iran” inside the administration — and that they might need to “end run” the president with scenarios that may narrow his choices. The option that Wurmser allegedly discussed was nudging Israel to launch a low-yield cruise missile strike against the Natanz nuclear reactor in Iran, thus “hopefully” prompting a military reaction by Tehran against U.S. forces in Iraq and the Gulf. When queried about Wurmser’s alleged comments, a senior Bush administration official [told the New York Times](#), “The vice president is not necessarily responsible for every single thing that comes out of the mouth of every single member of his staff.”

We know Bush rebuffed Cheney’s view and is seeking other alternatives. That is the most clear evidence that Bush is not committed to bombing Iran. Even if Bush wanted to make the Iranians believe that he could go either way — diplomacy or military strike — Bush would not so clearly knock back one side in favor of the other to the point where the “bad cops” in a good cop/bad cop strategy would tell anyone on the outside that they did not enjoy the favor and support of the president.

Bush is aware that America’s intelligence on Iran is weak. Even without admitting America’s blind spots on Iraq, the intelligence failures on Iraq’s WMD program create a formidable credibility hurdle.

Bush knows that the American military is stretched and that bombing Iran would not be a casual exercise. Reprisals in the Gulf toward U.S. forces and Iran’s ability to cut off supply lines to the 160,000 U.S. troops currently deployed in Iraq could seriously endanger the entire American military.

Bush can also see China and Russia waiting in the wings, not to promote conflict but to take advantage of self-destructive missteps that the United States takes that would give them more leverage over and control of global energy flows. Iran has the third-largest undeveloped oil reserves in the world and the second-largest undeveloped natural gas reserves.

Bush also knows that Iran controls “the temperature” of the terror networks it runs. Bombing Iran would blow the control gauge off, and Iran’s terror networks could mobilize throughout the Middle East, Afghanistan and even the United States.

In sum, Bush does not plan to escalate toward a direct military conflict with Iran, at least not now — and probably not later. The costs are too high, and there are still many options to be tried before the worst of all options is put back on the table. As it stands today, he wants that “third option,” even if Cheney doesn’t. Bush’s war-prone team failed him on Iraq, and this time he’ll be more reserved, more cautious. That is why a classic buildup to war with Iran, one in which the decision to bomb has already been made, is not something we should be worried about today.

What we should worry about, however, is the continued effort by the neocons to shore up their sagging influence. They now fear that events and arguments could intervene to keep what once seemed like a “nearly inevitable” attack from happening. They know that they must keep up the pressure on Bush and maintain a drumbeat calling for war.

They are doing exactly this during September and October in a series of meetings organized by the American Enterprise Institute on Iran and Iraq designed to reemphasize the case for hawkish, interventionist deployments in Iraq and a military, regime-change-oriented strike

against Iran. And through Op-Eds and the serious political media, the “bomb Iran now” crowd believes they must undermine those in and out of government proposing alternatives to bombing and keep the president and his people saturated with pro-war mantras.

We should also worry about the kind of scenario David Wurmser floated, meaning an engineered provocation. An “accidental war” would escalate quickly and “end run,” as Wurmser put it, the president’s diplomatic, intelligence and military decision-making apparatus. It would most likely be triggered by one or both of the two people who would see their political fortunes rise through a new conflict — Cheney and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

That kind of war is much more probable and very much worth worrying about.

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