

Freedom's Watch targeting Iran

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After successfully holding the line on Congressional support for the surge in Iraq, wealthy Bush backers are turning their attention and money to drumming up support for military action against Iran

If the U.S. undertakes military action against Iran, you can credit such longtime neoconservatives as Norman Podhoretz, William Kristol, Michael Ledeen and the swarm of ideologues buzzing about Washington's right wing think tanks. You can also credit Pastor John Hagee and his Christians United for Israel, a Christian Zionist outfit with unbending support for Israel. And credit also the billionaire and multimillionaire founders of Freedom's Watch for helping smooth the way.

Later this month, Freedom's Watch will sponsor a forum of some 20 experts on "radical Islam" that, according to a front page story in the *New York Times*, "is expected to make the case that Iran poses a direct threat to the security of the United States."

The forum is being "organized with the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington, DC-based neoconservative think tank, and it is 'private,'" John Stauber the Executive Director of the Center for Media and Democracy, told *Media Transparency*. "The fact that Freedom's Watch has been discussing it with the *New York Times* appears to be a great teaser to keep the press interested in who will be there, what will be discussed, etc."

"This in itself is a public relations ploy; they don't need to announce a private forum, they can hold one any time they want," Stauber pointed out. "But they want to keep the organization in the media spotlight and look significant and important from a policy perspective."

The idea for Freedom's Watch (FW) first surfaced in March of this year at the winter meeting of the Republican Jewish Coalition (RJC) in Manalapan, Florida, where Vice President Dick Cheney accused House Democrats of not supporting the troops in Iraq. The RJC, which is credited with shepherding then-Texas Governor George W. Bush on his first tour of Israel in November 1998, is a big-money pro-Israel lobby group that networks Jewish-American neoconservatives, Christian Right leaders and conservatives in Israel.

The Freedom's Watch "inner circle of strategists and donors are close to Vice President Dick Cheney or held high posts at the White House," the Associated Press's Jim Kuhnenn pointed out in late September.

According to its website, Freedom's Watch is a 501 (c) (4) nonprofit corporation; it can lobby on issues but cannot expressly advocate for specific candidates. It is "dedicated to fighting to protect the ideals and issues that keep America strong and prosperous." It is "rallying

together” to: “Bring the focus back to the real threats to our nation”; “Fight back against the policies that are corrupting America’s ability to protect our citizens, our economy, and our way of life”; and “Reprioritize our legislative agenda to protect America’s core values.”

“Ideologically, we are inspired by much of Ronald Reagan’s thinking — peace through strength, protect and defend America, and prosperity through free enterprise,” Freedom’s Watch’s co-founder and spokesperson Ari Fleischer, the former White House press secretary to President George W. Bush from 2001 to 2003, has stated.

Big-time movers and shakers

Among the group’s founders and major donors are Sheldon Adelson, the chairman and chief executive of the Las Vegas Sands Corporation, who ranks sixth on the *Forbes* magazine list of the world’s billionaires; Mel Sembler, the controversial Florida multi-millionaire, who is a former U.S. Ambassador to Italy and Australia and is a member of board of directors of the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute and is also serving on the national finance committee of GOP presidential contender Mitt Romney; Matt Brooks, executive director of the Republican Jewish Coalition; and Anthony Gioia, a longtime Republican Party donor who served as U.S. Ambassador to Malta until 2004 and is former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani’s Western New York State Finance Chair.

Also in the mix are Kevin Moley, who served as the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva from September 2001 to April 2006; Howard Leach, a big-time GOP donor who served as Ambassador to France until 2005; Dr. John Templeton, Jr., the son of mutual-funds pioneer Sir John Templeton and chairman and president of the John Templeton Foundation who is serving as chairman on Romney’s National Faith And Values Steering Committee; Edward Snider, chairman of Comcast-Spectacor, the huge Philadelphia sports and entertainment firm; Gary Erlbaum, Vice Chairman of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia and Chairman of the Federation’s Israel Emergency Campaign and the Executive Vice President of the Jewish Publishing Group which publishes the *Jewish Exponent* and *Inside* magazine; and Richard Fox, chairman of the Jewish Policy Center and Pennsylvania State Chairman of the Reagan/Bush campaign in 1980.

Writing in the October 8, 2007 issue of the *American Conservative*, Philip Weiss reported that a story titled “Pro-Surge Group Is Almost All Jewish,” from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, a wire service for Jewish news, noted that four out of five members of Freedom’s Watch board are Jewish, and half of its donors are Jewish. According to Weiss, “The JTA quoted one of its directors, Matthew Brooks, saying this was strictly a ‘coincidence.’”

When Brooks was asked by Weiss “whether Freedom’s Watch was devoted to Israel’s security,” Brooks replied: “That is absolutely not true. This is a broad-based organization. For anyone to draw any conclusion that we are focused on Jewish issues is an incorrect assumption and false in reality ... We are vehemently and strongly focused on making the case for the war on terror as being in America’s interest. Israel’s interest is totally irrelevant.”

Supporting the surge

Freedom’s Watch made its first public splash just prior to the appearance of General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker before Congress, testifying about the situation in

Iraq. In late-August, FW launched a \$15 million radio and television advertising campaign aimed at maintaining Congressional support for President Bush's surge and the occupation of Iraq.

The heart-wrenching ads featured a wounded Iraq veteran pleading with Congress and the American people not to "surrender" in Iraq. A still photograph of the second hijacked plane heading for the World Trade Center on 9/11 is shown while Sergeant Kriesel says, "They attacked us, and they will again. They won't stop in Iraq."

Freedom's Watch's pro-surge ads "are the handiwork" of Jamestown Associates, whose client list also includes the Republican Jewish Coalition and Benjamin Netanyahu, leader of Israel's Likud Party," David McKee reported in late September in *Las Vegas CityLife*. Jamestown Associates website describes the company as a "full-service Republican political and public affairs consulting firm" with offices in Washington, D.C., Princeton, N.J., Baton Rouge, La., and Dallas, Texas."

Freedom's Watch intends to raise \$200 million by November 2008, one anonymous benefactor told the *New York Times*.

Targeting Iran

While supporting the surge in Iraq was its first public campaign, Freedom's Watch has another target in mind: Iran.

In late September, the group ran a newspaper advertisement calling Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad "a terrorist."

"If Hitler's warnings were heeded when he wrote 'Mein Kampf,' he could have been stopped," Bradley Blakeman, the president of Freedom's Watch and a former assistant to President George W. Bush, told the *New York Times*. "Ahmadinejad is giving all the same kind of warning signs to us, and the region — he wants the destruction of the United States and the destruction of Israel."

Blakeman is apparently giving "the same kind of warning signs" to the American people that a well-financed media campaign advocating military action against Iran is on Freedom's Watch's drawing boards.

Look for another series of slick advertisements: Perhaps footage of Hitler's storm-troopers overrunning Poland juxtaposed against shots of Iran's Revolutionary Guard goose-stepping down a Tehran street. Perhaps a few mushroom clouds while Ahmadinejad's wrong-headed remarks roll across the screen. Not emotional enough? Pictures of wounded U. S. soldiers in Iraq in a split screen with caches of weapons stamped "Made in Iran."

Since most people in the U.S. now believe that it was wrong for Bush to invade Iraq and that the original mistake has been compounded by the administration's mistakes and miscalculations and its refusal to set a timetable for withdrawing from that country, is it possible that Freedom's Watch's money-men can convince the public that a military strike against Iran is the right thing to do?

Although Freedom's Watch "declined to identify the experts" appearing at its late-October forum on Iran, "several were invited from the American Enterprise Institute," the *New York Times* reported. "Some institute scholars have advocated a more confrontational policy to

prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, including keeping military action as an option.”

“They may keep the meeting closed or possibly open it up,” John Stauber noted. “If they do keep it closed, you can be sure that participants will be talking with the press. This is an effective PR ploy to get their message out through reporters.”

“If you look at how Iraq was sold to the American public, a number of pro-war groups and committees of the same ilk and backing had meetings at the White House, embarked on policy discussion tours around the country with media, and appeared as experts on news shows,” Stauber pointed out.

“It should be remembered that Freedom’s Watch is run by a White House PR flack [Ari Fleischer] who was key to selling that last war. It is the same script, same images, same messages, and same players. And it is likely to provoke the same response from the mainstream media.”

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