

From the Wonderful Folks Who Brought You Iraq

The same neocon ideologues fabricating intelligence on W.M.D.—to push for the bombing of Iran

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The same neocon ideologues behind the Iraq war have been using the same tactics—alliances with shady exiles, dubious intelligence on W.M.D.—to push for the bombing of Iran. As President Bush ups the pressure on Tehran, is he planning to double his Middle East bet?

In the weeks leading up to George W. Bush's January 10 speech on the war in Iraq, there was a brief but heady moment when it seemed that the president might finally accept the failure of his Middle East policy and try something new. Rising anti-war sentiment had swept congressional Republicans out of power. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had been tossed overboard. And the Iraq Study Group (I.S.G.), chaired by former secretary of state James Baker and former congressman Lee Hamilton, had put together a bipartisan report that offered a face-saving strategy to exit Iraq. Who better than Baker, the Bush family's longtime friend and *consigliere*, to talk some sense into the president?

By the time the president finished his speech from the White House library, however, all those hopes had vanished. It wasn't just that Bush was doubling down on an extravagantly costly bet by sending 21,500 more American troops to Iraq; there were also indications that he was upping the ante by an order of magnitude. The most conspicuous clue was a four-letter word that Bush uttered six times in the course of his speech: Iran.



His nuclear ambitions make Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (left) a threat. But attacking Iran—as former Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu (right) has urged—could be Bush's biggest blunder of all.

In a clear reference to the Islamic Republic and its sometime ally Syria, Bush vowed to “seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies.” At about the same time his speech was taking place, U.S. troops stormed an Iranian liaison office in Erbil, a Kurdish-controlled city in northern Iraq, and arrested and detained five Iranians working there.

Already, hundreds of billions of dollars have been spent on the war in Iraq. Tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of people have been killed. Countless more are wounded or living as refugees. Launched with the intention of shoring up Israeli security and replacing rogue regimes in the Middle East with friendly, pro-Western allies, the war in Iraq has instead turned that country into a terrorist training ground. By eliminating Saddam Hussein, the U.S.-led coalition has sparked a Sunni-Shiite civil war, which threatens to spread throughout the entire Middle East. And, far from creating a secular democracy, the war has empowered

Shiite fundamentalists aligned with Iran. The most powerful of these, Muqtada al-Sadr, commands both an anti-American sectarian militia and the largest voting bloc in the Iraqi parliament.

“Everything the advocates of war said would happen hasn’t happened,” says the president of Americans for Tax Reform, Grover Norquist, an influential conservative who backed the Iraq invasion. “And all the things the critics said would happen have happened. [The president’s neoconservative advisers] are effectively saying, ‘Invade Iran. Then everyone will see how smart we are.’ But after you’ve lost x number of times at the roulette wheel, do you double-down?”

By now, the story of how neoconservatives hijacked American foreign policy is a familiar one. With Vice President Dick Cheney and Rumsfeld leading the way, neocons working out of the office of the vice president and the Department of Defense orchestrated a spectacular disinformation operation, asserting that Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction posed a grave and immediate threat to the U.S. Veteran analysts who disagreed were circumvented. Dubious information from known fabricators was hyped. Forged documents showing phony yellowcake-uranium sales to Iraq were promoted.

What’s less understood is that the same tactics have been in play with Iran. Once again, neocon ideologues have been flogging questionable intelligence about W.M.D. Once again, dubious Middle East exile groups are making the rounds in Washington—this time urging regime change in Syria and Iran. Once again, heroic new exile leaders are promising freedom.

Meanwhile, a series of recent moves by the military have lent credence to widespread reports that the U.S. is secretly preparing for a massive air attack against Iran. (No one is suggesting a ground invasion.) First came the deployment order of U.S. Navy ships to the Persian Gulf. Then came high-level personnel shifts signaling a new focus on naval and air operations rather than the ground combat that predominates in Iraq. In his January 10 speech, Bush announced that he was sending Patriot missiles to the Middle East to defend U.S. allies—presumably from Iran. And he pointedly asserted that Iran was “providing material support for attacks on American troops,” a charge that could easily evolve into a *casus belli*.

“It is absolutely parallel,” says Philip Giraldi, a former C.I.A. counterterrorism specialist. “They’re using the same dance steps—demonize the bad guys, the pretext of diplomacy, keep out of negotiations, use proxies. It is Iraq redux.”

The neoconservatives have had Iran in their sights for more than a decade. On July 8, 1996, Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s newly elected prime minister and the leader of its right-wing Likud Party, paid a visit to the neoconservative luminary Richard Perle in Washington, D.C. The subject of their meeting was a policy paper that Perle and other analysts had written for an Israeli-American think tank, the Institute for Advanced Strategic Political Studies. Titled “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm,” the paper contained the kernel of a breathtakingly radical vision for a new Middle East. By waging wars against Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, the paper asserted, Israel and the U.S. could stabilize the region. Later, the neoconservatives argued that this policy could democratize the Middle East.

“It was the beginning of thought,” says Meyrav Wurmser, an Israeli-American policy expert, who co-signed the paper with her husband, David Wurmser, now a top Middle East adviser

to Dick Cheney. Other signers included Perle and Douglas Feith, the undersecretary of defense for policy during George W. Bush's first term. "It was the seeds of a new vision."

Netanyahu certainly seemed to think so. Two days after meeting with Perle, the prime minister addressed a joint session of Congress with a speech that borrowed from "A Clean Break." He called for the "democratization" of terrorist states in the Middle East and warned that peaceful means might not be sufficient. War might be unavoidable.

Netanyahu also made one significant addition to "A Clean Break." The paper's authors were concerned primarily with Syria and Saddam Hussein's Iraq, but Netanyahu saw a greater threat elsewhere. "The most dangerous of these regimes is Iran," he said.

Ten years later, "A Clean Break" looks like nothing less than a playbook for U.S.-Israeli foreign policy during the Bush-Cheney era. Many of the initiatives outlined in the paper have been implemented—removing Saddam from power, setting aside the "land for peace" formula to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, attacking Hezbollah in Lebanon—all with disastrous results.

Nevertheless, neoconservatives still advocate continuing on the path Netanyahu staked out in his speech and taking the fight to Iran. As they see it, the Iraqi debacle is not the product of their failed policies. Rather, it is the result of America's failure to think big. "It's a mess, isn't it?" says Meyrav Wurmser, who now serves as director of the Center for Middle East Policy at the Hudson Institute. "My argument has always been that this war is senseless if you don't give it a regional context."

She isn't alone. One neocon after another has made the same plea: Iraq was the beginning, not the end. Writing in *The Weekly Standard* last spring, Reuel Marc Gerecht, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, made the neocon case for bombing Iran's nuclear sites. Brushing away criticism that a pre-emptive attack would cause anti-Americanism within Iran, Gerecht asserted that it "would actually accelerate internal debate" in a way that would be "painful for the ruling clergy." As for imperiling the U.S. mission in Iraq, Gerecht argued that Iran "can't really hurt us there." Ultimately, he concluded, "we may have to fight a war—perhaps sooner rather than later—to stop such evil men from obtaining the worst weapons we know."

More recently, Netanyahu himself, who may yet return to power in Israel, went as far as to frame the issue in terms of the Holocaust. "Iran is Germany, and it's 1938," he said during a CNN interview in November. "Except that this Nazi regime that is in Iran ... wants to dominate the world, annihilate the Jews, but also annihilate America."

Like the campaign to overthrow Saddam, the crusade for regime change in Iran got under way in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. One of the first shots came in *The Wall Street Journal* in November 2001, when Eliot Cohen, a member of the neoconservative Project for the New American Century (PNAC), declared, "The overthrow of the first theocratic revolutionary Muslim state [Iran] and its replacement by a moderate or secular government ... would be no less important a victory in this war than the annihilation of bin Laden."

Then, as now, the U.S. had no official diplomatic communications with Iran, but a series of back-channel meetings from 2001 to 2003 put unofficial policy initiatives into action. The man who initiated these meetings was Michael Ledeen, an Iran specialist, neocon firebrand, and Freedom Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. During the Iran-contra

investigations of the late 80s, Ledeen won notoriety for having introduced President Ronald Reagan's chief intriguer, Oliver North, to Manucher Ghorbanifar, an Iranian arms dealer and con man.

Ghorbanifar helped set up the first meetings, in Rome in December 2001. Among those attending were Harold Rhode, a protégé of Ledeen's, and Larry Franklin, of the Office of Special Plans, the Pentagon bureau that manipulated pre-war intelligence on Iraq. (Franklin has since pleaded guilty to passing secrets to Israel and has been sentenced to 12 years in prison.) Ghorbanifar reportedly arranged an additional meeting in Rome in June 2002. This one was attended by a high-level U.S. official and dissidents from Egypt and Iraq. Then, in June 2003, just three months after the invasion of Iraq, Franklin and Rhode met secretly with Ghorbanifar in Paris at yet another gathering that was not approved by the Pentagon.

According to Ledeen, Ghorbanifar and his sources produced valuable information at the 2001 meetings about Iranian plans for attacking U.S. forces in Afghanistan. But it is also likely that there was some discussion of destabilizing Iran. As the *Washington Monthly* reported, the meetings raised the possibility "that a rogue faction at the Pentagon was trying to work outside normal U.S. foreign policy channels to advance a 'regime-change' agenda."

Also in attendance at the first meetings, according to administration sources who spoke to Warren P. Strobel, of Knight Ridder Newspapers, were representatives of the Mujahideen e-Khalq, or MEK, an urban-guerrilla group that practiced a brand of revolutionary Marxism heavily influenced by Mao Zedong and Che Guevara.

Having expertly exploited phony intelligence promoted by the Iraqi National Congress (I.N.C.), a dubious exile group run by the convicted embezzler Ahmad Chalabi, the neocons were now pursuing an alliance with an even shadier collection of exiles. According to a 2003 report by the State Department, "During the 1970s, the MEK killed US military personnel and US civilians working on defense projects in Tehran.... The MEK detonated bombs in the head office of the Islamic Republic Party and the Premier's office, killing some 70 high-ranking Iranian officials.... In 1991, it assisted the Government of Iraq in suppressing the Shia and Kurdish uprisings in southern Iraq and the Kurdish uprisings in the north." In other words, the MEK was a terrorist group—one that took its orders from Saddam Hussein.

To hear some neocons tell it, though, the MEK militants weren't terrorists—they were America's best hope in Iran. In January 2004, Richard Perle was the guest speaker at a fundraiser sponsored by the MEK, although he later claimed to have been unaware of the connection. And in a speech before the National Press Club in late 2005, Raymond Tanter, of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, recommended that the Bush administration use the MEK and its political arm, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (N.C.R.I.), as an insurgent militia against Iran. "The National Council of Resistance of Iran and the Mujahedeen-e Khalq are not only the best source for intelligence on Iran's potential violations of the nonproliferation regime. The NCRI and MEK are also a possible ally of the West in bringing about regime change in Tehran," he said.

Tanter went as far as to suggest that the U.S. consider using tactical nuclear weapons against Iran. "One military option is the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator, which may have the capability to destroy hardened deeply buried targets. That is, bunker-busting bombs could destroy tunnels and other underground facilities." He granted that the Non-Proliferation Treaty bans the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states, such as

Iran, but added that “the United States has sold Israel bunker-busting bombs, which keeps the military option on the table.” In other words, the U.S. can’t nuke Iran, but Israel, which never signed the treaty and maintains an unacknowledged nuclear arsenal, can.

Shortly after the invasion of Iraq, when the U.S. mission there seemed accomplished or at least accomplishable, Iran came to fear that it would be next in the crosshairs. To stave off that possibility, Iran’s leadership, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, began to assemble a negotiating package. Suddenly, everything was on the table—Iran’s nuclear program, policy toward Israel, support of Hamas and Hezbollah, and control over al-Qaeda operatives captured since the U.S. went to war in Afghanistan.

This comprehensive proposal, which diplomats took to calling “the grand bargain,” was sent to Washington on May 2, 2003, just before a meeting in Geneva between Iran’s U.N. ambassador, Javad Zarif, and neocon Zalmay Khalilzad, then a senior director at the National Security Council. (Khalilzad went on to become the U.S. ambassador to Iraq and was recently nominated to be America’s envoy to the U.N.) According to a report by Gareth Porter in *The American Prospect*, Iran offered to take “decisive action against any terrorists (above all, al-Qaeda) in Iranian territory.” In exchange, Iran wanted the U.S. to pursue “anti-Iranian terrorists”—i.e., the MEK. Specifically, Iran offered to share the names of senior al-Qaeda operatives in its custody in return for the names of MEK cadres captured by the U.S. in Iraq.

Well aware that the U.S. was concerned about its nuclear program, Iran proclaimed its right to “full access to peaceful nuclear technology,” but offered to submit to much stricter inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (I.A.E.A.). On the subject of Israel, Iran offered to join with moderate Arab regimes such as Egypt and Jordan in accepting the 2002 Arab League Beirut declaration calling for peace with Israel in return for Israel’s withdrawal to its pre-1967 borders. The negotiating package also included proposals to normalize Hezbollah into a mere “political organization within Lebanon,” to bring about a “stop of any material support to Palestinian opposition groups (Hamas, Jihad, etc.) from Iranian territory,” and to apply “pressure on these organizations to stop violent actions against civilians within borders of 1967.”

To be sure, Iran’s proposal was only a first step. There were countless unanswered questions, and many reasons not to trust the Islamic Republic. Given the initiative’s historic scope, however, it was somewhat surprising when the Bush administration simply declined to respond. There was not even an interagency meeting to discuss it. “The State Department knew it had no chance at the interagency level of arguing the case for it successfully,” former N.S.C. staffer Flynt Leverett told *The American Prospect*. “They weren’t going to waste [Colin] Powell’s rapidly diminishing capital on something that unlikely.”

Iran had sent the proposal through an intermediary, Tim Guldemann, the Swiss ambassador to the U.S. A few days later, Leverett said, the White House had the State Department send Guldemann a message reprimanding him for exceeding his diplomatic mandate. “We’re not interested in any grand bargain,” said Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton, who went on to become interim ambassador to the U.N. until his resignation last December.

If the MEK has been cast as the Iranian counterpart to the I.N.C., there are more than enough Iranian and Syrian Ahmad Chalabis to go around. Reza Pahlavi, the son of the late

Shah, has been shopped around Washington as a prospective leader of Iran. And Farid Ghadry, a Syrian exile in Virginia who founded the Reform Party of Syria, is the neocon favorite to rule Syria. Ghadry has an unusual résumé for a Syrian—he's a member of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the right-wing pro-Israel lobbying group—and he has endured so many comparisons to the disgraced leader of the I.N.C. that he once sent out a mass e-mail headlined, "I am not Ahmad Chalabi."

Nevertheless, according to a report in *The American Prospect*, Meyrav Wurmser last year introduced Ghadry to key administration figures, including the vice president's daughter Elizabeth Cheney, who—as principal deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs and coordinator for broader Middle East and North Africa initiatives—plays a key role in the Bush administration's policy in the region. According to the *Financial Times*, Elizabeth Cheney, who has been on maternity leave since May, had supervised the State Department's Iran-Syria Operations Group, created last spring to plot a strategy to democratize those two "rogue" states. One of her responsibilities was to oversee a projected \$85 million program to produce anti-Iran propaganda and support dissidents.

By the end of 2002, MEK operatives had provided the administration with intelligence asserting that Iran had built a secret uranium-enrichment site. As reported in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, David Albright, a former I.A.E.A. weapons inspector in Iraq, said that the data provided by the MEK was better than that provided by the I.N.C. But he added that it was possible Iran was enriching the uranium for energy purposes, and cautioned that Saddam's former mercenaries could not be relied upon to provide objective intelligence about Iran's W.M.D. "We should be very suspicious about what our leaders or the exile groups say about Iran's nuclear capacity," Albright said. "There's a drumbeat of allegations, but there's not a whole lot of solid information. It may be that Iran has not made the decision to build nuclear weapons."

The MEK wasn't the administration's only dubious source of nuclear intelligence. In July 2005, House intelligence committee chairman Peter Hoekstra (Republican, Michigan) and committee member Curt Weldon (Republican, Pennsylvania) met secretly in Paris with an Iranian exile known as "Ali." Weldon had just published a book called *Countdown to Terror*, alleging that the C.I.A. was ignoring intelligence about Iranian-sponsored terror plots against the U.S., and Ali had been one of his main sources.

But according to the C.I.A.'s former Paris station chief Bill Murray, Ali, whose real name is Fereidoun Mahdavi, fabricated much of the information. "Mahdavi works for Ghorbanifar," Murray told Laura Rozen of *The American Prospect*. "The two are inseparable. Ghorbanifar put Mahdavi out to meet with Weldon."

More than a year later, in August 2006, Peter Hoekstra released a House-intelligence-committee report titled "Recognizing Iran as a Strategic Threat: An Intelligence Challenge for the United States." Written by Frederick Fleitz, former special assistant to John Bolton, the report asserted that the C.I.A. lacked "the ability to acquire essential information necessary to make judgments" on Tehran's nuclear program.

The House report received widespread national publicity, but critics were quick to point out its errors. Gary Sick, senior research scholar at the Middle East Institute of Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs and an Iran specialist with the N.S.C. under Presidents Ford, Reagan, and Carter, says the report overstates both the number and range of Iran's missiles and neglects to mention that the I.A.E.A. found no evidence of

weapons production or activity. "Some people will recall that the IAEA inspectors, in their caution, were closer to the truth about Iraqi WMD than, say the Vice President's office," Sick remarked.

"This is like pre-war Iraq all over again," David Albright said in *The Washington Post*. "You have an Iranian nuclear threat that is spun up, using bad information that's cherry-picked and a report that trashes the inspectors."

Curt Weldon's 20-year career in Congress came to an end on November 7, 2006, when he lost his seat to Democrat Joe Sestak, a navy vice admiral who'd served in Iraq. Two weeks later, Seymour Hersh reported in *The New Yorker* that a classified assessment by the C.I.A. had found no conclusive evidence as yet that Iran had a secret nuclear-weapons program.

To Israel, however, it didn't matter whether a secret weapons program existed. For a state as antagonistic as Iran even to know how to make nuclear weapons was unacceptable. Long before the Iraq invasion, Israeli officials had told the Bush administration that Iran was a far greater threat than Iraq. "If you look at President Bush's 'axis of evil' list, all of us said North Korea and Iran are more urgent," says former Mossad director of intelligence Uzi Arad, who served as Netanyahu's foreign-policy adviser. "Iraq was already semi-controlled because there were sanctions. It was outlawed. Sometimes the answer [from the neocons] was 'Let's do first things first. Once we do Iraq, we'll have a military presence in Iraq, which would enable us to handle the Iranians from closer quarters, would give us more leverage.'"

Instead, the Americans got bogged down in the Iraqi quagmire, and Iran elected a frightening new president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in 2005. His anti-Israel tirades and aggressive pursuit of nuclear technology led Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to say that Iran threatened not just Israel but the entire world. Outside the administration, neocon ideologues responded with bolder calls for military action against Iran. In *The Weekly Standard*, Gerecht threw down the gauntlet: "If the ruling clerical elite wants a head-on collision with a determined superpower, then that's their choice." (In January, Iran's parliament responded to new U.N. economic sanctions with a rebuke of Ahmadinejad that raised doubts about his political future.)

But just as the neocons put Iran on the front burner, opposition to the Iraq war began to mount within the U.S. As the 2006 midterm elections approached, one Republican after another began to back away from Bush's war. That March, former secretary of state James Baker and Lee Hamilton, the former chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, joined forces to found the Iraq Study Group and search for an exit strategy.

Baker's realpolitik is anathema to neocons, but it is worth remembering that Bush, despite pursuing a neoconservative agenda in Iraq, is not a dyed-in-the-wool member of their group. "The president is a true believer in the policies the administration has been engaged in," says one former N.S.C. staffer. "When it is applied to the policies regarding the Palestinians, Hamas, or Iran, there is a common thread. It is not pure neoconservatism, nor is it the pragmatic realism we saw under Bush One."

Bush showed his willingness to depart from the neocon line a year ago, when he received an unusual proposition from Israeli officials together with the Palestinian president, Mahmoud "Abu Mazen" Abbas, and a top administration neoconservative, Deputy National-Security Adviser Elliott Abrams. According to a Middle East expert, the Israelis and Abbas had determined that Hamas was positioned to fare strongly in the upcoming Palestinian

elections, so they came to the administration with a plan to postpone them. “The Israelis and the Palestinians together had worked out a way to do it,” says the expert. “The Israelis were going to say that Hamas candidates could not run in Jerusalem, which was under Israeli jurisdiction, because they did not recognize Israel’s right to exist. And Abu Mazen was going to say if they can’t run in Jerusalem, then we can’t have an election now, [because] it wouldn’t be fair to Hamas. It was all worked out.”

There was just one problem: Bush, whose enthusiasm for spreading democracy had led him to actively lobby for the elections, didn’t want to go along. “The president said no,” the expert says. “He said elections will be good for Hamas. They would have to be responsible. They expected Hamas to do well, but not get a majority. Now they’ve become the government and it’s a big mess.” If anything, Bush had shown himself to be *less* pragmatic than his neocon advisers.

Reached via e-mail, a spokesperson for the National Security Council responded, “When the elections were rescheduled for January 2006, after earlier being postponed by the [Palestinian Authority], the United States took the position that they should be held and not postponed yet again. We were advised during the campaign by some of our Palestinian interlocutors that Hamas would win. We do not believe in cancelling elections because we may not like the outcome.”

Martin Indyk, the director of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy, at the Brookings Institution, and former U.S. ambassador to Israel, says Bush’s decision reflects a mistaken belief that “elections are the most important way to promote democracy.” Indyk explains, “It would have been better to build up the rule of law, establish independent judiciaries, promote freedom of religion and the press, and insist on the principle of a monopoly of force in the hands of the elected government. Ignoring that last principle in favor of elections was Bush’s biggest mistake. As a result, in Palestine, Iraq, and Lebanon, parties with militias have moved into the government. Hamas, Muqtada al-Sadr, and Hezbollah have taken advantage of elections to promote their policies, which are antithetical to democracy.”

Baker’s entry onto the scene didn’t just raise new questions about Bush’s openness to pragmatic solutions; it also introduced an Oedipal element into the drama. Baker and Bush’s father, after all, were best friends. Tennis partners. More than 40 years earlier, when George W. was a 16-year-old student at Andover, Baker had given him a summer job as a messenger at Baker Botts, his Houston law firm. Now, along with Brent Scowcroft, the elder Bush’s former national-security adviser, Baker was leading a coterie of multilateralists and realists who found themselves aghast at the radical direction the younger Bush was taking American foreign policy, and desperate to reverse it.

In July 2006, after Israel’s disastrous attack on Hezbollah in Lebanon, Scowcroft offered the administration some foreign-policy advice on the opinion page of *The Washington Post*, arguing that the crisis in Lebanon provided a “historic opportunity” to achieve a comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Resolving that conflict, Scowcroft argued, was crucial to stabilizing the region—including Iraq.

According to an article in *Salon* by Sidney Blumenthal, who was a senior adviser to President Bill Clinton, Scowcroft, with the assent of Baker and the elder Bush, sought and found support for this notion from the rulers of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Even Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Scowcroft’s former protégé, seemed receptive, so he asked her to help open the president’s mind to the forthcoming I.S.G. report.

As the November congressional elections approached, there were a number of indications that foreign-policy realists such as Scowcroft were gaining favor. Key neoconservative architects of the war in Iraq—Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, and Richard Perle—were no longer part of the Bush foreign-policy team, and the State Department, all but inoperative during the run-up to the Iraq war, was showing new signs of life. “My sense is that the Iran portfolio has been shifted to State,” Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran specialist for the nonprofit International Crisis Group, told me last fall. “Secretary Rice and her deputies are more influential than the vice president and the secretary of defense. It’s an about-face in U.S. policy after two decades of not talking to Iran.”

Meanwhile, more than a month before its report was due to be released, sources close to the Iraq Study Group had begun talking to the press, and word quickly leaked out that its recommendations would be largely aimed at achieving stability rather than democracy in Iraq. When it came to Iran, a source told me, the I.S.G. might recommend “comprehensive and unconditional talks with the regime” in Tehran—something Bush had already ruled out.

On November 7, the Democrats won both houses of Congress. The next day, Rumsfeld resigned. Bush vowed to “find common ground” with the Democrats. At last, the moderates seemed to have prevailed over the neocons.

On December 6, the Iraq Study Group finally released its report, “The Way Forward—A New Approach.” Bipartisan reports tend to be bland affairs, but this one was different. Describing the situation in Iraq as “grave and deteriorating,” the I.S.G. report did not shy away from pointing out that the new Iraqi Army, the police force, and even Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki often showed greater loyalty to their ethnic identities than to the ideal of a nonsectarian, democratic Iraq. Ultimately, the report concluded that sending more American soldiers to Iraq would not resolve what were fundamentally political problems. The subtext was clear: America’s policies in Iraq had failed. It was time for the administration to cut its losses. A Gallup poll from December 12 showed that, among people who had an opinion on the subject, five out of six supported implementing the report’s recommendations.

The only American whose opinion mattered, however, was not impressed. Bush, *Salon* reported, slammed the I.S.G. study as “a flaming turd.” If Rice even delivered Scowcroft’s message, it had fallen on deaf ears.

Just eight days later, on December 14, Bush found a study that was more to his liking. Not surprisingly, it came from the American Enterprise Institute, the intellectual stronghold of neoconservatism. The author, Frederick Kagan, a resident scholar at the A.E.I., is the son of Donald Kagan and the brother of Robert Kagan, who signed PNAC’s famous 1998 letter to President Bill Clinton urging him to overthrow Saddam Hussein. According to Kagan, the project began in late September or early October at the instigation of his boss, Danielle Pletka, vice president for foreign and defense policy studies at A.E.I. She decided “it would be helpful to do a realistic evaluation of what would be required to secure Baghdad,” Kagan told *Vanity Fair*.

The project culminated in a four-day planning exercise in early December, Kagan said, that just happened to coincide with the release of the Iraq Study Group report. But he rejected the notion that his study had been initiated by the White House as an alternative to the bipartisan assessment. “I’m aware of some of the rumors,” Kagan said. “This was not designed to be an anti-I.S.G. report.... Any conspiracy theories beyond that are nonsense.

"There was no contact with the Bush administration. We put this together on our own I did not have any contact with the vice president's office prior to ... well, I don't want to say that. I have had periodic contact with the vice president's office, but I can't tell you the dates. If you are barking up the story that the V.P. put this together, that is not true."

Kagan's report was sharply at odds with the consensus forged by the top brass in Iraq. Iraq commander General George Casey and General John Abizaid, the head of Central Command (CentCom), had argued that sending additional troops to Iraq would be counterproductive. (Later they both reversed course.) Kagan's study, on the contrary, suggested that with a massive surge of new troops America could finally succeed. It cites the military's new counter-insurgency manual, which suggests that a nation can be secured with a force of one soldier for every 40 to 50 inhabitants. That calculus would call for stationing more than 150,000 troops in Baghdad alone (there are currently 17,000 there), far more than is politically feasible today. But Kagan skirts this issue by asserting that "it is neither necessary nor wise to try to clear and hold the entire city all at once." Focusing instead on certain areas of Baghdad, he concludes that the deployment of 20,000 additional troops would be enough to pacify significant sections of the city. Even the title of Kagan's report must have been more appealing to Bush: "Choosing Victory: A Plan for Success in Iraq." Soon, it would be announced that Casey and Abizaid were being replaced with more amenable officers: Lieutenant General David Petraeus and Admiral William J. Fallon, respectively. The escalation was on.

In one sense, the neoconservative hawks—including the authors of "A Clean Break"—have been kept aloft by their failures. The strategic fiasco created by the Iraq war has actually increased the danger posed by Iran to Israel—and with it the likelihood of armed conflict. "[Bush's wars] have put Israel in the worst strategic and operational situation she's been in since 1948," says retired colonel Larry Wilkerson, who was Colin Powell's chief of staff in the State Department. "If you take down Iraq, you eliminate Iran's No. 1 enemy. And, oh, by the way, if you eliminate the Taliban, they might reasonably be assumed to be Iran's No. 2 enemy."

"Nobody thought going into this war that these guys would screw it up so badly, that Iraq would be taken out of the balance of power, that it would implode, and that Iran would become dominant," says Martin Indyk.

As a result, many Israelis believe that diplomacy is doomed and that Iran will have to be dealt with sooner or later. "Attacking Iraq when it had no W.M.D. may have been the wrong step," says Uzi Arad, the former Mossad intelligence chief. "But then to ignore Iran would compound the disaster. Israel will be left alone, and American interests will be affected catastrophically."

Even critics of the White House say that Iran's nuclear program poses a grave threat to Israel. "They correctly fear the Iranian nuclear program as an existential threat to Israel," says retired colonel W. Patrick Lang, who served as an officer for the Middle East, South Asia, and terrorism at the Defense Intelligence Agency. "They are not being silly about this. It really is a threat to Israel."

But waging war against Iran could be the most catastrophic choice of all. It is widely believed that Iran would respond to an attack by blockading the Strait of Hormuz, a 20-mile-wide narrows in the eastern part of the Persian Gulf through which about 40 percent of the world's oil exports are transported. Oil analysts say a blockade could propel the price of oil

to \$125 a barrel, sending the world economy into a tailspin. There could be vast international oil wars. Iran could act on its fierce rhetoric against Israel.

America's 130,000 soldiers in Iraq would also become highly vulnerable in the event of an attack on Iran. "Our troops in Iraq are supplied with food, fuel, and ammunition by truck convoys from a supply base in Kuwait," says Lang. "Most of that goes over roads that pass through the Shiite-dominated South of Iraq. The Iranians could cut those supply lines just like that—the trucks are easy to shoot at with R.P.G.'s," or rocket-propelled grenades.

In hopes of avoiding that, the Iraq Study Group advised Bush to open direct talks with Iran. Members of both parties in Congress have publicly given similar advice, as have former secretary of state Colin Powell and Robert Gates, the new secretary of defense. Still, it would be naïve to think that either a wall of opposition or the possibility of dire consequences would necessarily deter this president. Even before his January 10 speech, many inside the military had concluded that the decision to bomb Iran has already been made. "Bush's 'redline' for going to war is Iran having the knowledge to produce nuclear weapons—which is probably what they already have now," says Sam Gardiner, a retired air-force colonel who specializes in staging war games on the Middle East. "The president first said [that was his redline] in December 2005, and he has repeated it four times since then."

In April, Seymour Hersh reported in *The New Yorker* that U.S. troops were already on the ground in Iran, negotiating alliances with the Azerbaijanis in the North, the Kurds in the Northeast, and the Baluchis in the Southeast. In September, *Time* reported that a U.S. campaign to wipe out Iran's nuclear program could entail bombing up to 1,500 targets. More recently, Paul Craig Roberts, a former assistant secretary of the Treasury under Ronald Reagan, asserted in the *Baltimore Chronicle* that Bush "will attack Iran with tactical nuclear weapons, because it is the only way the neocons believe they can rescue their goal of U.S. (and Israeli) hegemony in the Middle East." Adds former C.I.A. officer Philip Giraldi, "I've heard from sources at the Pentagon that their impression is that the White House has made a decision that war is going to happen."

According to Sam Gardiner, the most telling sign that a decision to bomb has already been made was the October deployment order of minesweepers to the Persian Gulf, presumably to counter any attempt by Iran to blockade the Strait of Hormuz. "These have to be towed to the Gulf," Gardiner explains. "They are really small ships, the size of cabin cruisers, made of fiberglass and wood. And towing them to the Gulf can take three to four weeks."

Another serious development is the growing role of the U.S. Strategic Command (StratCom), which oversees nuclear weapons, missile defense, and protection against weapons of mass destruction. Bush has directed StratCom to draw up plans for a massive strike against Iran, at a time when CentCom has had its hands full overseeing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. "Shifting to StratCom indicates that they are talking about a really punishing air-force and naval air attack [on Iran]," says Lang.

Moreover, he continues, Bush can count on the military to carry out such a mission even without congressional authorization. "If they write a plan like that and the president issues an execute order, the forces will execute it. He's got the power to do that as commander-in-chief. We set that up during the Cold War. It may, after the fact, be considered illegal, or an impeachable offense, but if he orders them to do it, they will do it."

Lang also notes that the recent appointment of a naval officer, Admiral William Fallon, to the

top post at CentCom may be another indication that Bush intends to bomb Iran. "It makes very little sense that a person with this background should be appointed to be theater commander in a theater in which two essentially 'ground' wars are being fought, unless it is intended to conduct yet another war which will be different in character," he wrote in his blog. "The employment of Admiral Fallon suggests that they are thinking about something that is not a ground campaign."

Lang predicts that tensions will escalate once the administration grasps the truth about Prime Minister Maliki. "They want him to be George Washington, to bind together the new country of Iraq," says Lang. "And he's not that. He is a Shia, a factional political leader, whose goal is to solidify the position of Shia Arabs in Iraq. That's his goal. So he won't let them do anything effective against [Muqtada al-Sadr's] Mahdi army." Recently, a complicated cat-and-mouse game has begun, with Maliki's forces arresting hundreds of Mahdi militiamen, including a key aide to Muqtada al-Sadr. But there are many unanswered questions about the operations, which could amount to little more than a short-term effort to appease the U.S.

Gary Sick is slightly more optimistic that the Bush administration's Iran strategy entails more than brute force. "What has happened is that the United States, in installing a Shiite government in Iraq, has really upset the balance of power [in the Middle East]," Sick says. "Along with our Sunni allies—Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt—[the administration is] terribly concerned about Iran emerging as the new colossus. Having created this problem, the U.S. is now in effect using it as a means of uniting forces who are sympathetic [to us]."

In order to do that, Sick says, the administration must reassure America's allies that it is serious about protecting them if the conflict spreads throughout the region—drawing in Shiite Iran, Sunni Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, which would resist any attempt by the Kurds to create an independent state. "That means providing Patriot missiles, if Iran goes after the Saudi oil ports," he says. "One of the prices we will have to pay is a more active role in the Arab-Israeli dispute. Then there is fighting Hezbollah in Lebanon. The president has signed a covert-action finding that allows the C.I.A. to confront and counter Hezbollah in Lebanon. So this is a very broad strategy. It has a clear enemy and an appeal to Saudis, to Israelis, and has a potential of putting together a fairly significant coalition."

For all that, Sick acknowledges, this policy carries a significant risk of provoking war with Iran: "Basically, this is a signal to Maliki that we are not going to tolerate Shiite cooperation with Iran. This could lead to the ultimate break with Maliki. But once you start sending these signals, you end up in a corner and you can't get out of it."

Whatever the administration's master plan may be, parts of it are already under way. In mid-January, the U.S. sent a second aircraft-carrier strike group to the Persian Gulf. According to Gardiner, by the end of February the United States will have enough forces in place to mount an assault on Iran. That, in the words of former national-security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, would be "an act of political folly" so severe that "the era of American preponderance could come to a premature end."

The Bush White House has already built the fire. Whether it will light the match remains to be seen.

Craig Unger is currently working on a book based on his article ["American Rapture,"](#) which

appeared in the December 2005 issue.

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