

Georgia War: A Neocon Election Ploy?

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Is it possible that this time the October surprise was tried in August, and that the garbage issue of brave little Georgia struggling for its survival from the grasp of the Russian bear was stoked to influence the U.S. presidential election?

Before you dismiss that possibility, consider the role of one Randy Scheunemann, for four years a paid lobbyist for the Georgian government who ended his official lobbying connection only in March, months after he became Republican presidential candidate John McCain's senior foreign policy adviser.

Previously, Scheunemann was best known as one of the neoconservatives who engineered the war in Iraq when he was a director of the Project for a New American Century. It was Scheunemann who, after working on the McCain 2000 presidential campaign, headed the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq, which championed the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

There are telltale signs that he played a similar role in the recent Georgia flare-up. How else to explain the folly of his close friend and former employer, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, in ordering an invasion of the breakaway region of South Ossetia, an invasion that clearly was expected to produce a Russian counterreaction? It is inconceivable that Saakashvili would have triggered this dangerous escalation without some assurance from influential Americans he trusted, like Scheunemann, that the United States would have his back. Scheunemann long guided McCain in these matters, even before he was officially running foreign policy for McCain's presidential campaign.

In 2005, while registered as a paid lobbyist for Georgia, Scheunemann worked with McCain to draft a congressional resolution pushing for Georgia's membership in NATO. A year later, while still on the Georgian payroll, Scheunemann accompanied McCain on a trip to that country, where they met with Saakashvili and supported his bellicose views toward Russia's Vladimir Putin.

Scheunemann is at the center of the neoconservative cabal that has come to dominate the Republican candidate's foreign policy stance in a replay of the run-up to the war against Iraq. These folks are always looking for a foreign enemy on which to base a new Cold War, and with the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, it was Putin's Russia that came increasingly to fit the bill.

Yes, it sounds diabolical, but that may be the most accurate way to assess the designs of the McCain campaign in matters of war and peace. There is every indication that the candidate's demonization of Russian leader Putin is an even grander plan than the previous use of Saddam to fuel American militarism with the fearsome enemy that it desperately needs.

McCain gets to look tough with a new Cold War to fight while Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama, scrambling to make sense of a more measured foreign policy posture, will seem weak in comparison. Meanwhile, the dire consequences of the Bush legacy that McCain has inherited, from the disaster of Iraq to the economic meltdown, conveniently will be ignored. But the military-industrial complex, which has helped bankroll the neoconservatives, will be provided with an excuse for ramping up a military budget that is already bigger than that of the rest of the world combined.

What is at work here is a neoconservative, self-fulfilling prophecy in which Russia is turned into an enemy that expands its largely reduced military, and Putin is cast as the new Josef Stalin bogeyman, evoking images of the old Soviet Union. McCain has condemned a “revanchist Russia” that should once again be contained. Although Putin has been the enormously popular elected leader of post-Communist Russia, it is assumed that imperialism is always lurking, not only in his DNA but in that of the Russian people.

How convenient to forget that Stalin was a Georgian, and indeed if Russian troops had occupied the threatened Georgian town of Gori they would have found a museum still honoring the local boy, who made good by seizing control of the Russian revolution. Indeed five Russian bombs were allegedly dropped on Gori’s Stalin Square on Tuesday.

It should also be mentioned that the post-Communist Georgians have imperial designs on South Ossetia and Abkhazia. What a stark contradiction that the United States, which championed Kosovo’s independence from Serbia, now is ignoring Georgia’s invasion of its ethnically rebellious provinces.

For McCain to so fervently embrace Scheunemann’s neoconservative line of demonizing Russia in the interest of appearing tough during an election campaign is a reminder that a senator can be old and yet wildly irresponsible.



AP photo, Mary Altaffer / Irakli Gedeniedze, pool

October comes early? Sen. John McCain and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

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