

Iran. The Next War

War with Iran has been in the works for the past five years

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Even before the bombs fell on Baghdad, a group of senior Pentagon officials were plotting to invade another country. Their covert campaign once again relied on false intelligence and shady allies. But this time, the target was Iran.

How did the Bush administration sell the Iraq war? Is war with Iran unavoidable?

I. The Israeli Connection

A few blocks off Pennsylvania Avenue, the FBI's eight-story Washington field office exudes all the charm of a maximum-security prison. Its curved roof is made of thick stainless steel, the bottom three floors are wrapped in granite and limestone, hydraulic bollards protect the ramp to the four-floor garage, and bulletproof security booths guard the entrance to the narrow lobby. On the fourth floor, like a tomb within a tomb, lies the most secret room in the \$100 million concrete fortress – out-of-bounds even for special agents without an escort. Here, in the Language Services Section, hundreds of linguists in padded earphones sit elbow-to-elbow in long rows, tapping computer keyboards as they eavesdrop on the phone lines of foreign embassies and other high-priority targets in the nation's capital.

At the far end of that room, on the morning of February 12th, 2003, a small group of eavesdroppers were listening intently for evidence of a treacherous crime. At the very moment that American forces were massing for an invasion of Iraq, there were indications that a rogue group of senior Pentagon officials were already conspiring to push the United States into another war – this time with Iran.

A few miles away, FBI agents watched as Larry Franklin, an Iran expert and career employee of the Defense Intelligence Agency, drove up to the Ritz-Carlton hotel across the Potomac from Washington. A trim man of fifty-six, with a tangle of blond hair speckled gray, Franklin had left his modest home in Kearneysville, West Virginia, shortly before dawn that morning to make the eighty-mile commute to his job at the Pentagon. Since 2002, he had been working in the Office of Special Plans, a crowded warren of blue cubicles on the building's fifth floor. A secretive unit responsible for long-term planning and propaganda for the invasion of Iraq, the office's staffers referred to themselves as "the cabal." They reported to Douglas Feith, the third-most-powerful official in the Defense Department, helping to concoct the fraudulent intelligence reports that were driving America to war in Iraq.

Just two weeks before, in his State of the Union address, President Bush had begun laying the groundwork for the invasion, falsely claiming that Saddam Hussein had the means to produce tens of thousands of biological and chemical weapons, including anthrax, botulinum toxin, sarin, mustard and VX nerve agent. But an attack on Iraq would require something

that alarmed Franklin and other neoconservatives almost as much as weapons of mass destruction: detente with Iran. As political columnist David Broder reported in The Washington Post, moderates in the Bush administration were “covertly negotiating for Iran to stay quiet and offer help to refugees when we go into Iraq.”

Franklin – a devout neoconservative who had been brought into Feith’s office because of his political beliefs – was hoping to undermine those talks. As FBI agents looked on, Franklin entered the restaurant at the Ritz and joined two other Americans who were also looking for ways to push the U.S. into a war with Iran. One was Steven Rosen, one of the most influential lobbyists in Washington. Sixty years old and nearly bald, with dark eyebrows and a seemingly permanent frown, Rosen was director of foreign-policy issues at Israel’s powerful lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Seated next to Rosen was AIPAC’s Iran expert, Keith Weissman. He and Rosen had been working together closely for a decade to pressure U.S. officials and members of Congress to turn up the heat on Tehran.

Over breakfast at the Ritz-Carlton, Franklin told the two lobbyists about a draft of a top-secret National Security Presidential Directive that dealt with U.S. policy on Iran. Crafted by Michael Rubin, the desk officer for Iraq and Iran in Feith’s office, the document called, in essence, for regime change in Iran. In the Pentagon’s view, according to one senior official there at the time, Iran was nothing but “a house of cards ready to be pushed over the precipice.” So far, though, the White House had rejected the Pentagon’s plan, favoring the State Department’s more moderate position of diplomacy. Now, unwilling to play by the rules any longer, Franklin was taking the extraordinary – and illegal – step of passing on highly classified information to lobbyists for a foreign state. Unable to win the internal battle over Iran being waged within the administration, a member of Feith’s secret unit in the Pentagon was effectively resorting to treason, recruiting AIPAC to use its enormous influence to pressure the president into adopting the draft directive and wage war against Iran.

It was a role that AIPAC was eager to play. Rosen, recognizing that Franklin could serve as a useful spy, immediately began plotting ways to plant him in the White House – specifically in the National Security Council, the epicenter of intelligence and national-security policy. By working there, Rosen told Franklin a few days later, he would be “by the elbow of the president.”

Knowing that such a maneuver was well within AIPAC’s capabilities, Franklin asked Rosen to “put in a good word” for him. Rosen agreed. “I’ll do what I can,” he said, adding that the breakfast meeting had been a real “eye-opener.”

Working together, the two men hoped to sell the United States on yet another bloody war. A few miles away, digital recorders at the FBI’s Language Services Section captured every word.

II. The Guru and the Exile

The White House accuses Iran and its president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, of developing WMDs and posing “a grave threat” – the exact same pretexts it used to invade Iraq.

In recent weeks, the attacks by Hezbollah on Israel have given neoconservatives in the Bush administration the pretext they were seeking to launch what former House Speaker Newt Gingrich calls “World War III.” Denouncing the bombings as “Iran’s proxy war,” William

Kristol of The Weekly Standard is urging the Pentagon to counter “this act of Iranian aggression with a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities.” According to Joseph Cirincione, an arms expert and the author of *Deadly Arsenals: Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Threats*, “The neoconservatives are now hoping to use the Israeli-Lebanon conflict as the trigger to launch a U.S. war against Syria, Iran or both.”

But the Bush administration’s hostility toward Iran is not simply an outgrowth of the current crisis. War with Iran has been in the works for the past five years, shaped in almost complete secrecy by a small group of senior Pentagon officials attached to the Office of Special Plans. The man who created the OSP was Douglas Feith, the undersecretary of defense for policy. A former Middle East specialist on the National Security Council in the Reagan administration, Feith had long urged Israel to secure its borders in the Middle East by attacking Iraq and Iran. After Bush’s election, Feith went to work to make that vision a reality, putting together a team of neoconservative hawks determined to drive the U.S. to attack Tehran. Before Bush had been in office a year, Feith’s team had arranged a covert meeting in Rome with a group of Iranians to discuss their clandestine help.

The meeting was arranged by Michael Ledeen, a member of the cabal brought aboard by Feith because of his connections in Iran. Described by The Jerusalem Post as “Washington’s neoconservative guru,” Ledeen grew up in California during the 1940s. His father designed the air-conditioning system for Walt Disney Studios, and Ledeen spent much of his early life surrounded by a world of fantasy. “All through my childhood we were an adjunct of the Disney universe,” he once recalled. “According to family legend, my mother was the model for Snow White, and we have a picture of her that does indeed look just like the movie character.”

In 1977, after earning a Ph.D. in history and philosophy and teaching in Rome for two years, Ledeen became the first executive director of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, a pro-Israel pressure group that served as a flagship of the neoconservative movement. A few years later, after Reagan was elected, Ledeen had become prominent enough to earn a spot as a consultant to the National Security Council alongside Feith. There he played a central role in the worst scandal of Reagan’s presidency: the covert deal to provide arms to Iran in exchange for American hostages being held in Lebanon. Ledeen served as the administration’s intermediary with Israel in the illegal-arms deal. In 1985, he met with Manucher Ghorbanifar, a one-time Iranian carpet salesman who was widely believed to be an Israeli agent. The CIA considered Ghorbanifar a dangerous con man and had issued a “burn notice” recommending that no U.S. agency have any dealings with him. Unfazed, Ledeen called Ghorbanifar “one of the most honest, educated, honorable men I have ever known.” The two men brokered the arms exchange – a transaction that would result in the indictment of fourteen senior officials in the Reagan administration.

“It was awful – you know, bad things happened,” Ledeen says now. “When Iran-Contra was over, I said, Boy, I’m never going to touch Iran again.”

But in 2001, soon after he arrived at the Pentagon, Ledeen once again met with Ghorbanifar. This time, instead of selling missiles to the Iranian regime, the two men were exploring how best to topple it.

“The meeting in Rome came about because my friend Manucher Ghorbanifar called me up,” Ledeen says. Stout and balding, with a scruffy white beard, Ledeen is sitting in the living room of his white-brick home in Chevy Chase, Maryland, smoking a Dominican cigar. His

Airedale terrier, Thurber, roams the room protectively. In his first extensive interview about the covert Pentagon operation, Ledeen makes no secret of his desire to topple the government in Tehran. "I want to bring down the regime," he says. "I want the regime gone. It's a country that is fanatically devoted to our destruction."

When Ghorbanifar called Ledeen in the fall of 2001, he claimed, as he often does, to have explosive intelligence that was vital to U.S. interests. "There are Iranians who have firsthand information about Iranian plans to kill Americans in Afghanistan," he told Ledeen. "Does anyone want to hear about it?"

Ledeen took the information to Stephen Hadley, the deputy national security adviser at the White House. "I know you're going to throw me out of the office," Ledeen told him, "and if I were you I would throw me out of the office too. But I promised that I would give you this option. Ghorbanifar has called me. He said these people are willing to come. Do you want anybody to go and talk to them?"

Hadley was interested. So was Zalmay Khalilzad, then the point man on Near East issues for the National Security Council and now the U.S. ambassador to Baghdad. "I think we have to do this, we have to hear this," Hadley said. Ledeen had the green light: As he puts it, "Every element of the American government knew this was going to happen in advance."

III. The Meeting in Rome

Larry Franklin, a former Bush administration official who attended the meeting in Rome, has pleaded guilty to passing classified information about Iran to a pro-Israel lobbying group. (Photo: Kevin Wolf / AP)

Weeks later, in December, a plane carrying Ledeen traveled to Rome with two other members of Feith's secret Pentagon unit: Larry Franklin and Harold Rhode, a protégé of Ledeen who has been called the "theoretician of the neocon movement." A specialist on Islam who speaks Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish and Farsi, Rhode had experience with shady exiles like Ghorbanifar: He was close to Ahmed Chalabi, the Iraqi dissident whose discredited intelligence helped drive the Bush administration to invade Baghdad. According to UPI, Rhode himself was later observed by CIA operatives passing "mind-boggling" intelligence to Israel, including sensitive information about U.S. military deployments in Iraq.

Completing the rogues' gallery that assembled in Rome that day was the man who helped Ledeen arrange the meeting: Nicolò Pollari, the director of Italy's military intelligence. Only two months earlier, Pollari had informed the Bush administration that Saddam Hussein had obtained uranium from West Africa – a key piece of false intelligence that Bush used to justify the invasion of Iraq.

To hide the shadowy rendezvous in Rome, Pollari provided a well-protected safe house near the noisy espresso bars and busy trattorias that surround the Piazza di Spagna in central Rome. "It was in a private apartment," Ledeen recalls. "It was fucking freezing – it was unheated." The Pentagon operatives and the men from Iran sat at a dining-room table strewn with demitasse cups of blackish coffee, ashtrays littered with crushed cigarette butts and detailed maps of Iran, Iraq and Syria. "They gave us information about the location and plans of Iranian terrorists who were going to kill Americans," Ledeen says.

Ledeen insists the intelligence was on the mark. "It was true," he says. "The information

was accurate.” Not according to his boss. “There wasn’t anything there that was of substance or of value that needed to be pursued further,” Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld later conceded. “It went nowhere.”

The men then turned their attention to their larger goal: regime change in Iran. Ghorbanifar suggested funding the overthrow of the Iranian government using hundreds of millions of dollars in cash supposedly hidden by Saddam Hussein. He even hinted that Saddam was hiding in Iran.

Ledeen, Franklin and Rhode were taking a page from Feith’s playbook on Iraq: They needed a front group of exiles and dissidents to call for the overthrow of Iran. According to sources familiar with the meeting, the Americans discussed joining forces with the Mujahedin-e Khalq, an anti-Iranian guerrilla army operating out of Iraq.

There was only one small problem: The MEK had been certified by the State Department as a terrorist organization. In fact, the White House was in the midst of negotiations with Tehran, which was offering to extradite five members of Al Qaeda thought to be of high intelligence value in return for Washington’s promise to drop all support for the MEK.

Ledeen denies any dealings with the group. “I wouldn’t get within a hundred miles of the MEK,” he says. “They have no following, no legitimacy.” But neoconservatives were eager to undermine any deal that involved cooperating with Iran. To the neocons, the value of the MEK as a weapon against Tehran greatly outweighed any benefit that might be derived from interrogating the Al Qaeda operatives – even though they might provide intelligence on future terrorist attacks, as well as clues to the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden.

Ledeen and his Pentagon cabal were not the only American officials to whom Ghorbanifar tried to funnel false intelligence on Iran. Last year, Rep. Curt Weldon, a Republican from Pennsylvania, claimed he had intelligence – from an “impeccable clandestine source” he code-named “Ali” – that the Iranian government was plotting to launch attacks against the United States. But when the CIA investigated the allegations, it turned out that Ali was Fereidoun Mahdavi, an Iranian exile who was serving as a frontman for Ghorbanifar and trying to shake down the CIA for \$150,000. “He is a fabricator,” said Bill Murray, the former CIA station chief in Paris. Weldon was furious: The agency had dismissed Ali, he insisted, “because they want to avoid, at all costs, drawing the United States into a war with Iran.”

After the Rome rendezvous, Ledeen and Ghorbanifar continued to meet several times a year, often for a day or two at a time. Rhode also met with Ghorbanifar in Paris, and the Iranian phoned or faxed his Pentagon contacts almost every day. At one point Ledeen notified the Pentagon that Ghorbanifar knew of highly enriched uranium being moved from Iraq to Iran. At another point, in 2003, he claimed that Tehran was only a few months away from exploding a nuclear bomb – even though international experts estimate that Iran is years away from developing nuclear weapons. But the accuracy of the reports wasn’t important – what mattered was their value in drumming up support for war. It was Iraq all over again.

IV. On the Trail of Mr. X

Such covert efforts by Feith’s team in the Pentagon started to have the desired effect. In November 2003, Rumsfeld approved a plan known as CONPLAN 8022-02, which for the first time established a pre-emptive-strike capability against Iran. That was followed in 2004 by a

top-secret “Interim Global Strike Alert Order” that put the military on a state of readiness to launch an airborne and missile attack against Iran, should Bush issue the command. “We’re now at the point where we are essentially on alert,” said Lt. Gen. Bruce Carlson, commander of the 8th Air Force. “We have the capacity to plan and execute global strikes in half a day or less.”

But as the Pentagon moved the country closer to war with Iran, the FBI was expanding its investigation of AIPAC and its role in the plot. David Szady, then the bureau’s top spy-catcher, had become convinced that at least one American citizen working inside the U.S. government was spying for Israel. “It’s no longer just our traditional adversaries who want to steal our secrets, but sometimes even our allies,” Szady declared. “The threat is incredibly serious.” To locate the spy sometimes referred to as Mr. X, agents working for Szady began focusing on a small group of neoconservatives in the Pentagon – including Feith, Ledeen and Rhode.

The FBI also had its sights on Larry Franklin, who continued to hold clandestine meetings with Rosen at AIPAC. Apparently nervous that the FBI might be on to them, the two men started taking precautions. On March 10th, 2003, barely a week before the invasion of Iraq, Rosen met Franklin in Washington’s cavernous Union Station. The pair met at one restaurant, then they hustled to another, and finally they ended up in a third – this one totally empty. As an added precaution, Franklin also began sending faxes to Rosen’s home instead of to his AIPAC offices.

A few days later, Rosen and Weissman passed on to Israeli-embassy officials details about the draft of the top-secret presidential directive on Iran, saying they had received the document from a “friend of ours in the Pentagon.” They also relayed to the Israelis details about internal Bush-administration discussions on Iran. Then, two days before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Rosen leaked the information to the press with the comment “I’m not supposed to know this.” The Washington Post eventually published the story under the headline “Pressure Builds for President to Declare Strategy on Iran,” crediting the classified information to “well-placed sources.” The story mentioned Ledeen, who helped found the Coalition for Democracy in Iran, a pressure group dedicated to the overthrow of the Iranian government, but gave no indication that the leak had come from someone with a definite agenda for planting the information.

That June, Weissman called Franklin and left a message that he and Rosen wanted to meet with him again and talk about “our favorite country.” The meeting took place in the Tivoli Restaurant, a dimly lit establishment two floors above the metro station in Arlington that was frequently used by intelligence types for quiet rendezvous. Over lunch in the mirrored dining room, the three men discussed the Post article, and Rosen acknowledged “the constraints” Franklin was under to meet with them. But the Pentagon official placed himself fully at AIPAC’s disposal. “You set the agenda,” Franklin told Rosen.

In addition to meeting Rosen and Weissman, Franklin was also getting together regularly with Naor Gilon, an Israeli embassy official who, according to a senior U.S. counterintelligence official, “showed every sign of being an intelligence agent.” Franklin and Gilon would normally meet amid the weight machines and punching bags at the Pentagon Officers Athletic Club, where Franklin passed along secret information regarding Iran’s activities in Iraq, its missile-testing program and even, apparently, New York Times reporter Judith Miller. At one point, Gilon suggested that Franklin meet with Uzi Arad, Mossad’s former director of intelligence and former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s foreign-

policy adviser. A week later, Franklin had lunch in the Pentagon cafeteria with the former top Israeli spy.

V. Iran's Double Agent

Larry Franklin, it turns out, wasn't the only person involved in the Pentagon's covert operation who was exchanging state secrets with other governments. As the FBI monitored Franklin and his clandestine dealings with AIPAC, it was also investigating another explosive case of espionage linked to Feith's office and Iran. This one focused on Ahmed Chalabi, the head of the Iraqi National Congress, the militant anti-Saddam opposition group that had worked for more than a decade to pressure the U.S. into invading Iraq.

For years, the National Security Agency had possessed the codes used by Iran to encrypt its diplomatic messages, enabling the U.S. government to eavesdrop on virtually every communication between Tehran and its embassies. After the U.S. invaded Baghdad, the NSA used the codes to listen in on details of Iran's covert operations inside Iraq. But in 2004, the agency intercepted a series of urgent messages from the Iranian embassy in Baghdad. Intelligence officials at the embassy had discovered the massive security breach – tipped off by someone familiar with the U.S. code-breaking operation.

The blow to intelligence-gathering could not have come at a worse time. The Bush administration suspected that the Shiite government in Iran was aiding Shiite insurgents in Iraq, who were killing U.S. soldiers. The administration was also worried that Tehran was secretly developing nuclear weapons. Now, crucial intelligence that might have shed light on those operations had been cut off, potentially endangering American lives.

On May 20th, shortly after the discovery of the leak, Iraqi police backed by American soldiers raided Chalabi's home and offices in Baghdad. The FBI suspected that Chalabi, a Shiite who had a luxurious villa in Tehran and was close to senior Iranian officials, was actually working as a spy for the Shiite government of Iran. Getting the U.S. to invade Iraq was apparently part of a plan to install a pro-Iranian Shiite government in Baghdad, with Chalabi in charge. The bureau also suspected that Chalabi's intelligence chief had furnished Iran with highly classified information on U.S. troop movements, top-secret communications, plans of the provisional government and other closely guarded material on U.S. operations in Iraq. On the night of the raid, The CBS Evening News carried an exclusive report by correspondent Lesley Stahl that the U.S. government had "rock-solid" evidence that Chalabi had been passing extremely sensitive intelligence to Iran – evidence so sensitive that it could "get Americans killed."

The revelation shocked Franklin and other members of Feith's office. If true, the allegations meant that they had just launched a war to put into power an agent of their mortal enemy, Iran. Their man – the dissident leader who sat behind the first lady in the president's box during the State of the Union address in which Bush prepared the country for war – appeared to have been working for Iran all along.

Franklin needed to control the damage, and fast. He was one of the very few in the government who knew that it was the NSA code-breaking information that Chalabi was suspected of passing to Iran, and that there was absolute proof that Chalabi had met with a covert Iranian agent involved in operations against the U.S. To protect those in the Pentagon working for regime change in Tehran, Franklin needed to get out a simple message: We didn't know about Chalabi's secret dealings with Iran.

Franklin decided to leak the information to a friendly contact in the media: Adam Ciralsky, a CBS producer who had been fired from the CIA, allegedly for his close ties to Israel. On May 21st, the day after CBS broadcast its exclusive report on Chalabi, Franklin phoned Ciralsky and fed him the information. As the two men talked, eavesdroppers at the FBI's Washington field office recorded the conversation.

That night, Stahl followed up her original report with "new details" – the information leaked earlier that day by Franklin. She began, however, by making clear that she would not divulge the most explosive detail of all: the fact that Chalabi had wrecked the NSA's ability to eavesdrop on Iran. "Senior intelligence officials were stressing today that the information Ahmed Chalabi is alleged to have passed on to Iran is so seriously sensitive that the result of full disclosure would be highly damaging to U.S. security," Stahl said. "Because of that, we are not reporting the details of what exactly Chalabi is said to have compromised, at the request of U.S. officials at the highest levels. The information involves secrets that were held by only a handful of very senior intelligence officials." Thanks to the pressure from the administration, the public was prevented from learning the most damaging aspect of Chalabi's treachery.

Then Stahl moved on to Franklin's central message. "Meanwhile," she said, "we have been told that grave concerns about the true nature of Chalabi's relationship with Iran started after the U.S. obtained, quote, 'undeniable intelligence' that Chalabi met with a senior Iranian intelligence officer, a, quote, 'nefarious figure from the dark side of the regime, an individual with a direct hand in covert operations against the United States.' Chalabi never reported this meeting to anyone in the U.S. government, including his friends and sponsors." In short, the Pentagon – and Feith's office in particular – was blameless.

VI. The Cabal's Triumph

Soon after the broadcast, David Szady's team at the FBI decided to wrap up its investigation before Franklin leaked any more information. Agents quietly confronted Franklin with the taped phone call and pressured him to cooperate in a sting operation directed at AIPAC and members of Feith's team in the Pentagon. Franklin, facing a long prison sentence, agreed. On August 4th, 2005, Rosen and Weissman were indicted, and on January 20th, 2006, Franklin, who had earlier pleaded guilty, was sentenced to twelve years and seven months in prison. In an attempt to reduce his sentence, he agreed to testify against the former AIPAC officials. The case is set to go to trial this fall.

So far, however, Franklin is the only member of Feith's team to face charges. The continuing lack of indictments demonstrates how frighteningly easy it is for a small group of government officials to join forces with agents of foreign powers – whether it is AIPAC or the MEK or the INC – to sell the country on a disastrous war.

The most glaring unindicted co-conspirator is Ahmed Chalabi. Even top-ranking Republicans suspect him of double dealing: "I wouldn't be surprised if he told Iranians facts, issues, whatever, that we did not want them to know," said Rep. Chris Shays, R-Conn., who chairs the House subcommittee on national security. Yet the FBI has been unable to so much as question Chalabi as part of its ongoing espionage case. Last November, when Chalabi returned to the United States for a series of speeches and media events, the FBI tried to interview him. But because he was under State Department protection during his visit, sources in the Justice Department say, the bureau's request was flatly denied.

“Chalabi’s running around saying, ‘I have nothing to hide,’” says one senior FBI official. “Yet he’s using our State Department to keep us from him at the same time. And we’ve got to keep our mouth shut.”

In the end, the work of Franklin and the other members of Feith’s secret office had the desired effect. Working behind the scenes, the members of the Office of Special Plans succeeded in setting the United States on the path to all-out war with Iran. Indeed, since Bush was re-elected to a second term, he has made no secret of his desire to see Tehran fall. In a victory speech of sorts on Inauguration Day in January 2005, Vice President Dick Cheney warned bluntly that Iran was “right at the top” of the administration’s list of “trouble spots” – and that Israel “might well decide to act first” by attacking Iran. The Israelis, Cheney added in an obvious swipe at moderates in the State Department, would “let the rest of the world worry about cleaning up the diplomatic mess afterward.”

Over the past six months, the administration has adopted almost all of the hard-line stance advocated by the war cabal in the Pentagon. In May, Bush’s ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton, appeared before AIPAC’s annual conference and warned that Iran “must be made aware that if it continues down the path of international isolation, there will be tangible and painful consequences.” To back up the tough talk, the State Department is spending \$66 million to promote political change inside Iran – funding the same kind of dissident groups that helped drive the U.S. to war in Iraq. “We may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran,” Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared.

In addition, the State Department recently beefed up its Iran Desk from two people to ten, hired more Farsi speakers and set up eight intelligence units in foreign countries to focus on Iran. The administration’s National Security Strategy – the official policy document that sets out U.S. strategic priorities – now calls Iran the “single country” that most threatens U.S. interests.

The shift in official policy has thrilled former members of the cabal. To them, the war in Lebanon represents the final step in their plan to turn Iran into the next Iraq. Ledeen, writing in the National Review on July 13th, could hardly restrain himself. “Faster, please,” he urged the White House, arguing that the war should now be taken over by the U.S. military and expanded across the entire region. “The only way we are going to win this war is to bring down those regimes in Tehran and Damascus, and they are not going to fall as a result of fighting between their terrorist proxies in Gaza and Lebanon on the one hand, and Israel on the other. Only the United States can accomplish it,” he concluded. “There is no other way.”

James Bamford is the author of A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq and the Abuse of America’s Intelligence Agencies. His story for RS on consultant John Rendon, “The Man Who Sold the War” [RS 988], won the 2006 National Magazine Award for reporting. And he wrote the classic “Puzzle Palace” on the NSA.

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