

## **McGovern, R. (May 6, 2010). How to stumble into a war: Loose lips on Iran.**

***Counterpunch.*** <http://www.counterpunch.org/mcgovern05062010.html>

The omnipresent World War II-era posters with the words “Loose Lips Sink Ships” served as a warning to members of the U.S. military to take heed lest they divulge information that could tip off the enemy and result in defeat in battle.

I believe we need a new poster, because loose lips can also sink whole countries — including our own.

This is a lesson that members of Congress and Washington's media honchos should have learned from the disastrous invasion of Iraq; especially the ones whose lips helped President George W. Bush portray Saddam Hussein as a monster bristling with “weapons of mass destruction.”

In that time frame, of course, cooperating with Bush was “the smart play” for one’s career, even for many Democrats and liberal opinion leaders. But those politicians and pundits now should share responsibility for having allowed Bush to mislead the nation into a war that has maimed and killed thousands of American soldiers, not to mention hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians, with millions more driven from their homes into fetid refugee camps.

The complicit lawmakers also helped sail the American ship of state into a vast iceberg of debt.

In Washington, however, holding such powerful people accountable has become what former White House counsel and then Attorney General, Alberto Gonzales, would call “quaint” or “obsolete” — like adhering to the Geneva Conventions.

But wait; unless our Constitution has been relegated to the same status, we do have a chance every two years to make a judgment about politicians, whether they should continue to represent us or be driven from office. (Sadly, there’s less public leverage over the fate of pundits.)

Recently I have been looking on in disbelief as some of the same Democrats (and media personalities) who helped grease the skids for the unnecessary, unprovoked attack on Iraq, are doing a reprise — changing the script from Iraq to Iran.

The same kind of macho language (by no means limited to testosterone-laden men) is coming from lips of lawmakers who think that hyping the “threat” from Iran will position them well in winning an election (or perhaps buy some street cred with some campaign funders or the media mainstream).

### **‘Real Men Go to Tehran!’**

Think back seven years and recall the Blackwater-style bravado from the lips of neoconservatives like Donald Rumsfeld’s crony Kenneth Adelman — the fellow who assured us all that Iraq would be a “cakewalk.”

Even as this proved to be a fantasy, his neoconservative colleagues were beating their breasts like Tarzan and setting their eyes on Iran. The neocon joke at the time questioned what the next target should be – Syria or Iran? – with the punch line, “Real men go to Tehran!”

Then and today, however, it was not just Tarzans who were spoiling for a fight in the Middle East, but some Janes—in particular, Rep. Jane Harman, a California Democrat who was a senior member of the House Intelligence Committee at the time of the Iraq invasion.

From her position on the Intelligence Committee, Harman was better positioned than most of her colleagues to know that Bush was hyping or inventing the evidence of Iraq’s alleged WMD, but she still joined the stampede to war. Inventing evidence? Sadly true.

After the invasion and an exhaustive bipartisan investigation, Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Jay Rockefeller concluded that the Bush/Cheney administration “presented intelligence as fact when in reality it was unsubstantiated, contradicted, or even non-existent.”

Back in 2003, however, it would have taken some political courage to call out Bush and his team on their flimsy “evidence” or their outright lies. Career-wise, there was plenty of upside – and no discernable downside – to go along.

But why am I reprising this history now, you ask? Because it turns out Jane and some of the Tarzans are at it again, hyping the “threat” from Iran, where “real men” — and apparently some “real women” — still want to go.

Speaking on the House floor on April 22, Harman said:

“I am often asked to name those countries I think pose the greatest threat to the security of our country and the world. ... My answer every time is Iran, Iran, Iran. ... Given its myopic obsession with the destruction of Israel ... and its implacable, duplicitous march toward a nuclear weapons capability, in my view no other country comes close.”

(More objective observers might say, “Pakistan, Pakistan, Pakistan,” an unstable Islamic nation that actually acquired nuclear weapons with the acquiescence of the Reagan administration in the 1980s and is today the home for al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups, including the trainers of alleged Time Square bomber Faisal Shahzad. Shahzad's father, Bahar Ul Haq, was a former Pakistani air vice marshal reportedly with some responsibility over the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.)

### **Iran-Obsessed**

But Harman is obsessed with Iran, which is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, has renounced any intention of having nukes, and is considered years away from building one even if it wanted to.

To punish Iran for its speculative interest in nuclear weapons, Harman called for sanctions to “cripple Iran's ability to import refined petroleum products.” (As a Harvard-educated lawyer, she should be aware that, under international law, such a blockade would be an act of war. It also would inflict widespread hardship on the Iranian people.)

But Israel's right-wing Likud government and America's neocons have identified Iran as the new enemy. So, in line with that assessment, Harman ended her oration thusly:

“Iran with nuclear weapons not only poses an existential threat to Israel; it poses an existential threat to us [vocal emphasis hers] and to countries everywhere which espouse democratic values.”

Not even hawkish Secretary of State Hillary Clinton goes that far. At a formal press conference in Qatar, she said, “Iran doesn't directly threaten the United States,” though she added that Iran was a threat to U.S. friends in the region. Clinton's momentary deviation from the more alarmist rhetoric that official Washington favors when discussing Iran came while answering a question at a formal press conference in Doha, Qatar on Feb. 14. (Check it out; last time I looked, it was still on the State Department's Web site.) Clinton said:

“Part of the goal ... we were pursuing was to try to influence the Iranian decision regarding whether or not to pursue a nuclear weapon. And, as I said in my speech ... the evidence is accumulating that that [pursuing a nuclear weapon] is exactly what they are trying to do, which is deeply concerning, because it doesn't directly threaten the United States, but it directly threatens a lot of our friends, allies, and partners here in this region and beyond.”

When his turn came, Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Al-Thani did not join in the fear mongering, even when asked directly about “the danger that the Secretary just alluded to ... if Iran gets the bomb.” In answer, he implied, diplomatically but clearly, that he was at least as much afraid of what Israel and the U.S. might do, as what Iran might do.

### **Unspoken Friend**

The chief unspoken “friend” that Secretary Clinton claims is “directly threatened” by Iran is, of course, Israel, a nation which already has 200-300 nuclear weapons, has refused to sign the NPT and won’t even acknowledge its own nuclear arsenal in defiance of U.S. policy favoring adherence to the NPT and greater transparency on nuclear weapons.

The Israeli arsenal could easily incinerate Iran – if Iran does manage to build one or two nukes and is eager to commit suicide by threatening Israel. But let’s just assume, for argument’s sake, that the Israeli leaders really do consider Iran an “existential threat” to Israel. Should American lawmakers and opinion leaders hype a theoretical threat to Israel as a threat to the United States?

On one level, Clinton’s candor that Iran is not threatening the United States was refreshing. She seemed to be following the example of the Director of National Intelligence and his subordinates, who are carefully hewing to the judgments of the most recent formal National Intelligence Estimate, “Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities,” approved unanimously by all 16 U.S. intelligence agencies in November 2007.

That Estimate began with these words:

“We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program; we also assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons...”

“We assess with moderate confidence Tehran had not restarted its nuclear program as of mid-2007, but we do not know whether it currently intends to develop nuclear weapons...”

“Tehran’s decision to halt its nuclear weapons program suggests it is less determined to develop nuclear weapons than we have been judging since 2005.”

That National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) is now being updated, but recent congressional testimony by senior intelligence community officials has been consistent with the judgments of late 2007.

Gen. Ronald Burgess, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, and Gen. James Cartwright, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, addressed these issues in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on April 21.

Answering the question as to how soon Iran could have a deliverable nuclear weapon, Gen. Cartwright said:

“Experience says it is going to take you three to five years” to move from having enough highly enriched uranium to having a “deliverable weapon that is usable.”

The NIE of 2007 stated that if Iran does decide to pursue nuclear weapons, “We judge with moderate confidence that Iran probably would be technically capable of producing enough HEU [highly enriched uranium] for a weapon sometime during the 2010-2015 time frame.”

It appears that the time line for the hypothetical Iranian nuclear “threat” is slipping backward—not leaping forward, as Israeli officials and others insist.

According to press reports, the NIE-update will not be ready until August, and the Obama administration won’t release its key judgments, as was done in late 2007. It is a safe bet, though, that we shall learn of the revisions in due course and thus have a better take on any changes in Iran’s nuclear capabilities and intentions.

## **Getting Played Again**

What concerns me greatly, however, is that the American people are being played again by those both in government and the media who wish to zap Iran.

“Do you think Iran currently has nuclear weapons, or not?” Americans were asked in a CNN poll taken earlier this year (Feb. 12-15). Seventy-one percent of Americans polled answered incorrectly, Yes.

That’s very close to the percentage of Americans misled into believing that Saddam Hussein was developing nuclear weapons before the attack on Iraq in March 2003. Only later was the Bush administration forced to admit that its claims about an active Iraqi nuclear program were bogus.

Of equal concern to me are the statements of politicians who apparently believe we have forgotten the hype that got us into the Iraq mess — and are trying again to stoke a confrontation with Iran. The front-burner question today is whether loose lips and looser thinking will lead to an even more disastrous war with Iran BEFORE the intelligence community finishes its update on Iran's nuclear capabilities and intentions.

Given the consistency of the recent testimony of top intelligence officials, I will be much surprised if the NIE update comes to conclusions that differ substantially from the judgments of November 2007.

Ironically, that possibility provides more incentive for those who wish to attack Iran sooner rather than later, much as President Bush pushed United Nations inspectors out of Iraq in March 2003 and rushed ahead with the invasion before Americans woke up to the fact that the inspectors weren't finding any Iraqi WMD stockpiles because none existed.

I worry that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu will take the initiative now and provoke hostilities with Iran, judging that political realities in the United States would then leave President Barack Obama little choice but to "finish the job."

### **No Confidence in the FCM**

Another concern is that the Fawning Corporate Media remains as easily manipulated by the neocons and other hardliners as it was in 2003. Again, there are plenty of career rewards for talking tough about Iran and none for showing moderation. In this overheated climate of anti-Iran hysteria, politicians also will be tempted to ratchet up their rhetoric to come across as tough and "realistic." That, in turn, might convince Netanyahu that the time is right to force Obama's hand.

One might have hoped that after the Iraq fiasco, American voters would be smarter — and more resistant to clever propaganda — but the CNN poll on their misplaced confidence about Iran having nukes provides little reassurance.

As for Harman, she is facing a strong Democratic challenger, progressive Marcy Winograd, in the June 8 primary for California's 36th district. Because Harman has a personal fortune of about a half-billion (that's right, billion) dollars from which to draw — and Winograd says she is accepting "not one dime" of corporate money — the race is viewed as a test of whether it is possible for candidates to win without heaps of money for ad buys and other expenses.

The race also could measure whether Democratic voters will demand some accountability for lawmakers who sided with President Bush and the neocons in rushing the United States off to war in Iraq — and who now are spoiling for another fight with Iran.

I don't know how those tests will work out, especially given the continued sludge of one-sided propaganda that flows from the FCM.

What I do know is that incendiary rhetoric from lips like Harman's about the option of a military strike on Iran, her strident advocacy of an act of war (blockade), and her pretense that Netanyahu's claim of an "existential threat" from Iran applies also to the United States is a highly flammable mix.

It is just the kind of rhetoric that could give Netanyahu confidence that he can take matters into his own hands.

This will go in spades if Harman proves to be correct in thinking that her constituents are just as gullible as the ones who answered CNN pollsters in mid-February.

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