

US spy agencies pressed for “intelligence” to justify war against Iran

By Bill Van Auken
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With the clock ticking to an August 31 deadline set by the United Nations Security Council’s resolution demanding that Iran abandon its uranium enrichment program, a section of the American ruling establishment is pressing US intelligence agencies to produce “evidence” that Iran’s nuclear ambitions pose an imminent nuclear weapons threat.

The aim is the same as that pursued by Vice President Dick Cheney and others in the Bush administration in the run-up to the Iraq war who sought to manufacture phony “intelligence” that Saddam Hussein’s non-existent weapons of mass destruction justified a US invasion and occupation of the country.

This is the political significance of the hastily written and shoddy report issued by the House Intelligence Committee last Wednesday, a day after Iran issued its response to the UN ultimatum, which Washington deemed to have fallen “short” of the resolution’s conditions for avoiding sanctions.

While Russia and China—both veto-wielding members of the UN Security Council—have indicated support for Iran’s call for further negotiations, Washington is having none of it, demanding instead that Teheran unconditionally surrender to the UN diktat.

Iran has shown no inclination to follow such a course. Instead, on Saturday, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad staged a symbolic inauguration of a heavy water plant near Arak, in central Iran. He insisted that the facility was intended solely for peaceful purposes, serving medical, scientific and agricultural needs. But Western powers have stressed that it is possible to extract plutonium—a material used in the production of nuclear weapons—from spent fuel produced at an associated heavy water, research reactor that is still under construction.

The Bush administration has vowed to make an “expedited” push for economic sanctions unless the Iranian government fully submits before the August 31 deadline. There is every indication that it is deliberately pushing towards a confrontation with Teheran, making demands that it knows will be rejected and, as in the buildup to the war against Iraq, going through the motions at the UN in order to ultimately proclaim that the body is incapable of dealing with the crisis and unilateral American action is required.

According to the *Washington Post*, the House Committee report was drafted principally by a Republican committee staff member named Frederick Fleitz, who is a former CIA agent known for his hardline views on Iran. Fleitz became a special assistant to John Bolton, who, before being appointed US ambassador to the United Nations, was the State Department’s number-three official, responsible for arms proliferation.

Bolton, presumably with Fleitz’s assistance, played a prominent role in demonizing the governments of the so-called “axis of evil”—Iraq, Iran and North Korea—and sought to foment a scare campaign against Cuba by floating demonstrably false claims about Havana running a secret bio-weapons program.

The House Intelligence Committee report, entitled “Recognizing Iran as a Strategic Threat,” is a piece of war propaganda. It features a lurid cover

bearing a color photograph of Iranian President Ahmadinejad speaking at a podium bearing the logo “The World without Zionism.”

The thrust of the document is its contention that “the United States lacks critical information needed for analysts to make many of their judgments with confidence about Iran and there are many significant information gaps.”

It accuses the CIA and other US intelligence agencies of failing to demonstrate “the ability to acquire essential information necessary to make judgments on these essential topics, which have been recognized as essential to US national security.”

It goes on to produce its own wildly inflated charges against Iran, many of them based on willful distortions of intelligence reports issued by the US as well as those of the UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency. Other claims are founded on assertions, culled from newspaper reports, by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and other administration officials.

Its unsubstantiated claims about Iran’s nuclear program contradict all estimates by the US, the UN and the Iranian government itself. Thus, it claims that Iran is “enriching uranium to weapons grade using a 164-machine centrifuge cascade.” In reality, Iran has achieved 3.5 percent enrichment, not the 80 percent required to make a bomb. Making enough of such material for a weapon would require 16,000 centrifuges, not 164.

This attempt to invent ominous “intelligence” is apparently meant to counter well-established intelligence estimates that Iran is years away from achieving nuclear weapons. These estimates undercut attempts to use Iran’s nuclear program as a pretext for launching a “preventive war” of aggression.

The Bush administration’s director of national intelligence, John Negroponte, for example, told the BBC last June that Iran will not be “in a position to have a nuclear weapon” until “sometime between the beginning of the next decade and the middle of the next decade.” Similarly, last February, Negroponte told the Senate Intelligence Committee that US intelligence believes Iran has neither a nuclear weapon nor the fissile material needed to make one.

The House committee report goes on to make unsubstantiated claims portraying the recent Israeli war against Lebanon as the result of an Iranian-ordered provocation by Hezbollah, which it portrays as a mere Iranian pawn—an assessment rejected by virtually all those with knowledge of the region. This supposed relationship is then portrayed as an example of Iran using “terrorist proxies” to achieve a global reach.

The document states, “The nature of Iran’s relationship with Al Qaeda, if any, is unclear, and US intelligence must enhance its insights into this critical dynamic. Iran’s relationship with its proxies give [sic] it a global reach, which would be even more alarming should Tehran divert WMD to these groups.”

This is almost identical language to that employed by administration officials in 2002, when unsubstantiated reports and outright lies were used to invent an Iraqi-Al Qaeda connection. This fabrication was the basis of a campaign to terrorize the American people with the specter of terrorists,

armed by Iraq, attacking US cities with nuclear weapons.

The document suggests that similar “intelligence” is required about Iran. It states, “Analysts must evaluate all contingencies and consider out-of-the box assessments that challenge conventional wisdom.” It adds, “Iran analysts must also make greater use of open source intelligence on Iran, the availability of which is augmented by Iran’s prolific (if persecuted) press.”

For “out-of-the-box assessments” one should read fabricated intelligence on the order of the supposed Iraqi purchase of uranium in Niger, or Baghdad’s importation of aluminum tubes for a non-existent nuclear program.

As for the advice to rely more on “open source intelligence” and “persecuted” Iranian press sources, the aim is to demand greater reliance on Iranian exile groups, which are as notorious as their Iraqi counterparts for promoting the most lurid possible tales of weapons of mass destruction and extensive terrorist ties.

According to a report published August 24 in the *New York Times* citing unnamed official sources, the criticism and pressure directed at US intelligence agencies by the House committee report “reflect the views of some officials inside the White House and the Pentagon who advocated going to war with Iraq and now are pressing for confronting Iran directly over its nuclear program and ties to terrorism....”

The newspaper quoted one “senior United States official” faulting US intelligence agencies for failing to “make judgment calls.” He added, “We’re not in a court of law. When they say there is ‘no evidence,’ you have to ask them what they mean, what is the meaning of the term ‘evidence.’ ”

The definition of the term should be abundantly clear in the wake of the Iraq invasion, in which UN weapons inspectors and US analysts insisted there was no evidence to substantiate Washington’s claims about Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction.” In an attempt to counter these assessments, officials in the White House and the Pentagon browbeat CIA analysts into accepting the sensationalist accounts of exile groups as good coin, and went outside established channels to fabricate their own “intelligence.”

The most glaring example of this attempt to inflate the supposed threat from Iran came from former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. The prominent Republican told the *New York Times*: “When the intelligence community says Iran is 5 to 10 years away from a nuclear weapon, I ask: ‘If North Korea were to ship them a nuke tomorrow, how close would they be then?’ ”

Of course, the same twisted logic can be used to justify military action against Cuba, Venezuela, Syria or any nation that is deemed an impediment to the strategic interests of US imperialism.

The element of irrationality that pervades this debate is striking, and the push for punishing sanctions and even military action against Iran—given the present state of the US occupation in Iraq and the popular repudiation of US militarism throughout the world—appears to border on the insane.

Washington’s demand for the speedy approval of severe sanctions against Teheran will be met with popular contempt and hatred throughout the Arab and Muslim world, and beyond. The world watched in disgust as for six weeks Washington used all of its power to block any such sanctions against Israel and veto all international efforts to halt Israel’s wanton destruction of Lebanon and slaughter of innocent civilians.

It is widely predicted that a war against Iran could ignite a massive rebellion by the Shia population in Iraq against the already beleaguered US occupation forces, as well as upheavals throughout the Middle East and a possible cut-off of much of the world’s oil supplies, triggering a global economic crisis.

Yet the threat of war is unmistakable and explicit and is driven by the logic of the imperialist project initiated with the invasion of Iraq three-and-a-half years ago. The attempt to turn Iraq into a US

protectorate, thereby securing US domination over its vast oil resources, has produced a debacle and, by most estimates, served to strengthen the position of Iran, both within Iraq and throughout the region. The solution, according to prominent elements within American ruling circles, is to prepare a new war aimed at “regime change” in Iran.

Once again, there is little vocal opposition to such a war within the political establishment, with prominent Democrats having criticized the Bush administration from the right for failing to take a tough enough stand against Teheran.

In its August 24 editorial, the *Washington Post* took China and Russia to task for signaling support for Iran’s call for negotiations rather than Washington’s demand for immediate sanctions. The editorial concluded with a clear threat that failure to support Washington’s moves against Iran could only hasten US military action.

“But if Russia and China want to be accepted as forces for global stability that they claim to be,” the *Post* warned, “they should not undercut Western efforts to defuse the Iran crisis by peaceful means. No responsible power has anything to gain from further tension in the Middle East, still less an eventual war over Iran’s nuclear ambitions.”

In other words, if you do not support Washington’s attempts to use the UN as a cover for its buildup against Iran, you are responsible for the US launching another unilateral war of aggression.

Right-wing layers that have dominated the Republican Party and played the leading role in orchestrating Washington’s unprovoked war against Iraq are even more explicit. They have grown increasingly bitter in their criticism of the Bush administration’s policy toward Iran, and particularly the role played by the State Department and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. This has reached a hysterical pitch in the wake of the military setback and political defeat suffered by the US and Israel in Lebanon, with prominent right-wing columnists talking of “appeasement” and comparing the administration’s role to that of Neville Chamberlain’s 1938 dealings with Hitler in Munich.

Among the most chilling examples—but by no means out of the mainstream of the Republican right—was a piece written last week by Townhall.com columnist Walter Williams.

“Think about it,” wrote Williams. “Currently, the US has an arsenal of 18 Ohio class submarines. Just one submarine is loaded with 24 Trident nuclear missiles. Each Trident missile has eight nuclear warheads capable of being independently targeted. That means the US alone has the capacity to wipe out Iran, Syria or any other state that supports terrorist groups or engages in terrorism—without risking the life of a single soldier.”

Williams goes on to lament that Washington’s concern for “worldwide public opinion” and “weak will” is blocking the unleashing of a nuclear holocaust against these countries. “Any attempt to annihilate our Middle East enemies would create all sorts of handwringing about the innocent lives lost, so-called collateral damage.”

That such words can be written and published by political elements politically close to the current administration in Washington is a measure of the deep crisis of US imperialism and the profound dangers it poses. At least for some of these layers, victory in the “global war on terrorism” has come to mean annihilating tens of millions of people.

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