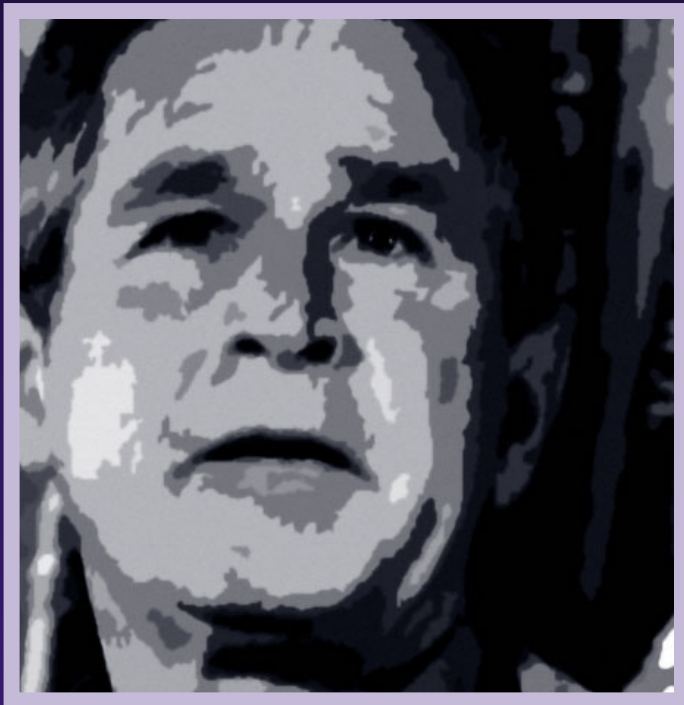


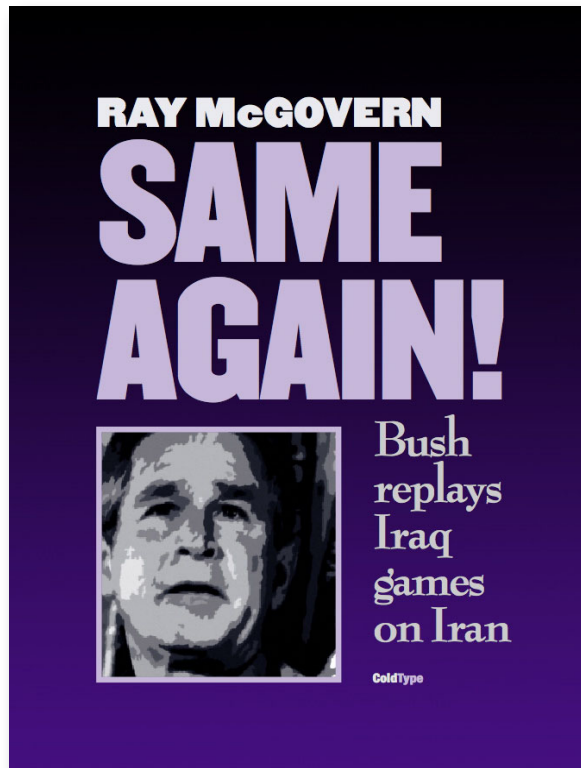
RAY McGOVERN

SAME AGAIN!



Bush
replays
Iraq
games
on Iran

ColdType



Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, the publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. During his 27-year career in CIA's analysis ranks, he chaired National Intelligence Estimates and briefed the President's Daily Brief to the most senior national security officials. He is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

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STOP! Please. Get beneath the hype over former White House press secretary Scott McClellan's book, *What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington's Culture of Deception*. Don't miss the forest for trees. Not since John Dean told the truth about President Richard Nixon's crimes have we had an account by a very close aide to a sitting president charging him with crimes of the most serious kind.

McClellan writes that George W. Bush abandoned "candor and honesty" to wage a "political campaign" that led the nation into an "unnecessary war."

The chief U.S. prosecutor of senior Nazi officials at the post-World War II Nuremberg Trials, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson, labeled such action – more correctly termed a war of aggression – the "supreme international crime."

In other words, President Bush used propaganda and deception to lead the United States into what an earlier generation of American leaders judged not just a war crime, but the "supreme" war crime. And, in all this, Bush had an eager cast aiding and abetting – from careerists in the U.S. intelligence community to the fawning corporate media (FCM) whom McClellan referred to as "deferential, complicit enablers."

As for the role of intelligence, McClellan tells of "shading the truth." In the effort to convince the world that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction, the president used "innuendo and implication" and intentional ignoring of intelligence to the contrary."

Water over the dam, you say? No way. White House spinners are at it again – "fixing" the intelligence around the policy, this time on Iran. The fixing is obvious, but don't expect to hear about it from the FCM. An exception is MSNBC's Keith Olbermann. His antiquated

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approach is to ask relevant questions – like, for example, will the White House do an encore in preparing us for an attack on Iran?

Interviewing McClellan at the end of May, Olbermann earmarked time to discuss Iran and asked, "So knowing what you know, if [White House spokeswoman] Dana Perino starts making noises similar to what you heard from Ari Fleischer in 2002...would you be suspicious?"

"I would be," McClellan said.

Wait. Before taking this with a blasé shrug, consider the source.

FIXING IN FITS AND STARTS

The worst kept secret in Washington is that Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney are looking for a pretext to order air and missile attacks on Iran. But when and how will Dana Perino and the rest of the propaganda machine market this one? When to sell? If former White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card's dictum regarding "marketing" the war on Iraq holds sway – i.e. "From a marketing point of view, you don't introduce new products in August" – the administration has only two months, unless it opts for an "October Surprise" as a more effective way to help achieve a Republican victory in November.

But a smooth rolling out of war on Iran has proven more troublesome – no thanks, by the way, to the FCM, most of them still claiming they did just fine before the war on Iraq. Part of the problem has been the new marketers. With Andy Card, Karl Rove, Dan Bartlett and Tony Snow gone, it is amateur hour for White House spinners as they start-stop and rotate rationales for striking Iran.

And how to sell? Less than a year ago the focus was two-fold:

- (1) What President Bush on Aug. 28 called "Tehran's murderous activities" against our troops, including "240-millimeter rockets that have been manufactured in Iran and that had been provided to Iraqi extremist groups by Iranian agents;" and
- (2) His ad-lib on Oct. 17: "We've got a leader in Iran who has announced he wants to destroy Israel...I take the threat of a nuclear Iran very seriously."

OOPS...

But where are those 240-millimeter rocket shells? For some reason, Gen. David Petraeus cannot deliver the goods. As recently as April 25, his nominal boss, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Adm. Mike Mullen, invited the press to what was supposed to be a well-oiled Show-and-Tell exercise "in a couple of weeks," to display a multitude of captured weapons from

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Iran. But the show did not go on; it had to be cancelled when the weapons that had been found proved not to be of Iranian origin. Ironically, one major hurdle would be getting senior Iraqi officials to go along with a hyped-up demonstration of weaponry from Iran.

Shortly after Mullen offered his invitation, the Iraqis announced that Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had formed his own Cabinet committee to investigate U.S. claims about Iranian weapons, and to attempt to "find tangible information and not information based on speculation."

The other pretext is the hyped-up danger from Iran's nuclear program. Here, the administration suffered acute embarrassment when a vestigial group of honest intelligence analysts and supervisors had the temerity to serve up an un-fixed National Intelligence Estimate last fall that showed that Bush had been knowingly exaggerating the nuclear threat from Iran.

The declassified key findings of the NIE were released on Dec. 3. They included:

- "We judge with high confidence that in the fall of 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 has not restarted its nuclear weapons 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. Our assessment that the program probably was halted primarily in response to international pressure suggests Iran may be more vulnerable to influence on the issue than we judged previously."

To Bush and Cheney's dismay, the findings had been shared with Congress and could not be suppressed. What followed was the ineffably inept performance one has come to expect from national security adviser Stephen Hadley, who claimed the Estimate "confirms we were right to be worried about Iran seeking to develop nuclear weapons [which] remains a very serious problem."

And before leaving for his early January 2008 trip to the Middle East, the president said part of his purpose was to make it "abundantly clear...that we view Iran as a threat, and that the NIE in no way lessens that threat, but in fact clarifies the threat."

Got that? Threat.

According to *Newsweek's* well-connected reporter Michael Hirsh, Bush all but disowned the NIE in conversations with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. According to a senior U.S.

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official accompanying the president, Bush told the Israelis that he couldn't control what the intelligence community says, but that the Estimate's key judgments do not reflect his own views.

Bush reportedly had briefed Olmert in November on the Estimate's findings, and seemed almost apologetic about the findings. After Bush departed Israel in January, a *Newsweek* reporter asked Olmert if he felt reassured; to which Olmert replied, "I am very happy."

A FLEXIBLE DIRECTOR OF NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Malleable Mike McConnell showed his true colors shortly after the president got back from Israel. Unable to withstand withering criticism from the likes of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, and the irrepressible former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. John Bolton, McConnell backpedaled. In testimony to the Senate on Feb. 5 he confessed to careless wording in the NIE due to time constraints, and even indicated he "probably would have changed a thing or two."

He would now say, for example, that "maybe even the least significant portion [of the Iranian nuclear program] was halted and there are other parts that continue."

Next at bat was the president himself in an interview on March 19 with the U.S. government-run Radio Farda broadcasting to Iran in Farsi. Bush asserted that Iran has "declared it wants a nuclear weapon to destroy people" and that it could be hiding a secret program. A White House clean-up team conceded that Bush's statement about what Iran has "declared" was inaccurate.

It was Defense Secretary Robert Gates's turn in April. Speaking at West Point, Gates said he believes Iran is "hell bent" on acquiring nuclear weapons. (Does it strike anyone that abandoning their weapons program in 2003 seems a strange way of going about it?) Gates added that he favored keeping the military option against Iran on the table.

THE NY TIMES JUMPS IN

And on May 27, the *New York Times* misquoted one of the key judgments of the NIE. More than a subtle distinction, the *Times* indicated that the Estimate stated, "It was uncertain whether the weapons work had resumed."

Speaking to the pro-Israel Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) two days later, McConnell's deputy, Donald Kerr, took the same line, emphasizing that "since the halted activities were part of an unannounced secret program Iran attempted to hide, we do not *know* if it has been restarted." (Emphasis in original)

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This is the spin that the president, senior officials – and the *New York Times* – have been putting on the NIE.

As noted above, the relevant NIE key judgment reads: "We assess with moderate confidence Tehran has not restarted its nuclear weapons program as of mid-2007..."

(Incidentally, that Kerr, as deputy to McConnell, would give a major address to WINEP moves the intelligence community much too close to a partisanship with this group, at least for this veteran intelligence officer's taste. Martin Indyk, erstwhile research director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, America's self-described "pro-Israel lobby," founded the institute. AIPAC is listed as its parent organization.)

Rather than shadowboxing, making confessions when it seems opportune and introducing subtle changes of emphasis aimed at making the Estimate's judgments more politically palatable, McConnell and Kerr should do their duty. And that is to follow the long established intelligence community procedure for updating an important NIE by ordering preparation of what is called a "Memorandum to Holders" – in this case, holders of last fall's NIE on Iran.

This is an orderly, time-tested way to get the 16 U.S. intelligence agencies that prepared the NIE on Iran to revisit it in a deliberate and rigorous way and to indicate what, if anything, they believe needs to be changed.

At the release of the unclassified version of the NIE on Iran on Dec. 3, 2007, Kerr issued a written statement explaining why the key judgments were being made public. "Since our understanding of Iran's capabilities has changed, we felt it was important to release this information to ensure that an accurate presentation is available," he said.

Exactly right. So if the NIE's judgments are being challenged and/or are in need of update, let Kerr or McConnell give the task to the dedicated professionals responsible for drafting the NIE late last year. And if McConnell should decide – or be told by the White House – not to, the congressional oversight committees should awake from their stupor and require a Memorandum for Holders. It is certainly their prerogative, their duty, to do so.

Someone apparently needs to tell Director McConnell that it is not required that the Israelis – or Kissinger, or Schlesinger, or Bolton – agree with the Estimate's conclusions, however much the president would like all to be in sync with the preferred line. And, given the stakes, the new findings should not be rushed or done on the cheap.

LEARNING CURVE STILL STEEP

McConnell (and Kerr, for that matter) are still new to substantive intelligence analysis, and McConnell has admitted having difficulty with the rigorous demands of the job. Frankly, I find it unsettling that one of them briefs the president six mornings a week. McConnell's lack of

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experience on issues other than technical intelligence collection showed through in an especially troubling way on Feb. 27, 2007, as he briefed the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, asked McConnell why the Israelis sometimes have a different view on Iran's nuclear program. McConnell appeared quite puzzled, noting the closeness of the U.S.-Israeli intelligence relationship and how U.S. intelligence officers discussed these things with the Israelis. As I watched, I could not help feeling sorry for the Director of National Intelligence – and for the rest of us, as well.

A pity that his predecessor, the more seasoned John Negroponte, did not take time to tell McConnell what he told NPR's Robert Siegel before Negroponte quit to go back to the State Department. Asked by Siegel to explain why the Israelis have suggested a much shorter timeline for Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon, Negroponte stated the obvious with bluntness uncommon for a diplomat: "I think that sometimes what the Israelis will do [is] give you the worst-case assessment."

Really!



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