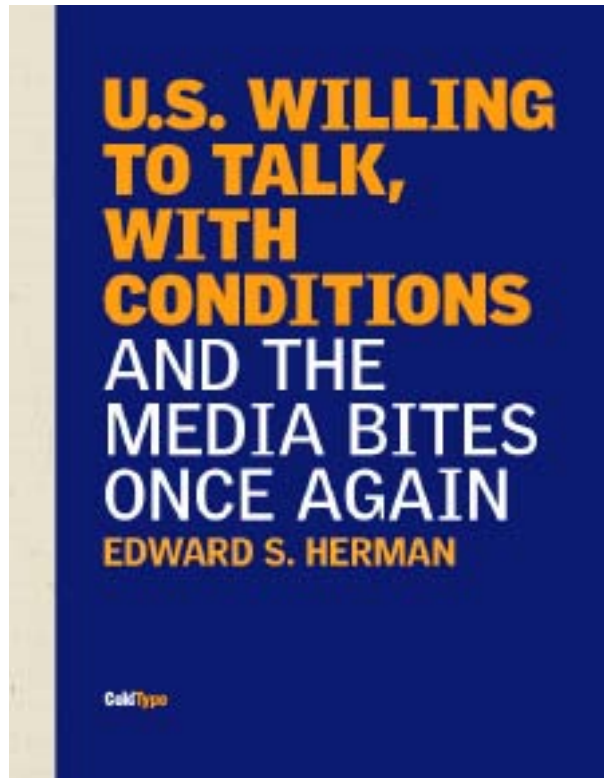


**U.S. WILLING
TO TALK,
WITH
CONDITIONS
AND THE
MEDIA BITES
ONCE AGAIN**
EDWARD S. HERMAN

ColdType



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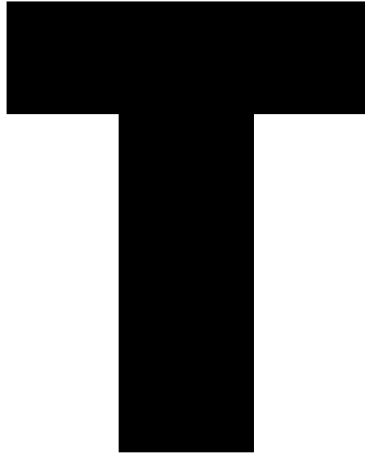
This article originally appeared in Z Magazine

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EDWARD S. HERMAN – THE MEDIA BITES AGAIN



he mainstream media have long had a high gullibility quotient when it comes to dealing with demonized external threats, which makes it easy to manage them and guide them into propaganda service. In the case of the ludicrous Guatemalan security threat of 1953-54, the publisher of the New York Times was persuaded by a United Fruit agent to send a reporter to Guatemala who “dutifully wrote a series of alarming reports about ‘Reds’ in the country” (Kinzer and Schlesinger, *Bitter Fruit*). Another United Fruit public relations man commented sardonically on the media’s gullibility in that case: “It is difficult to make a convincing case for manipulation of the press when the victims proved so eager for the experience.”

Given their regular eagerness-- or at a minimum, willingness--to support the government party line in dealing with a targeted enemy, the media never learn from experience. The forces that shape their news-making and editorial biases allow them to start anew with a fresh round of gullible propaganda service with little or no time lag. In the 1950s into the 1980s there was a series of alleged “gaps” which we allegedly suffered in relation to Soviet missile numbers and “throw-weight,” each of them fraudulent, but each of them exposed only with a time lag that didn’t interfere with a responsive U.S. buildup. Each exposure had no observable effect on the media’s gullible acceptance of the next round of gap production. More recently, and currently, we see the media getting on the Iran threat bandwagon only months after some of the media had issued semi-apologies for swallowing propaganda disinformation on Iraq’s menacing weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The forces integrating the media into the war-makers’ propaganda operations overwhelm their capacity to learn from experience.

THE VIETNAM WAR PHONY PEACE OFFERS

The new U.S. offer of direct talks with Iran, with conditions, is a throwback to an

EDWARD S. HERMAN – THE MEDIA BITES AGAIN

earlier round of offers of talks with conditions in which the media served state war propaganda very effectively, and at an immense cost in resources and human life. The U.S. bombing of Vietnam, which became open and earnest in February 1965, led to widespread protests and resistance. In April 1965 the Johnson administration therefore began a series of offers to “discuss” and “pauses” in the bombing during which it allegedly awaited a response from North Vietnam that could lead to peace. It was very obvious at the time, and has been established by solid documentary evidence since, that these pauses were for public relations purposes only, and that only a North Vietnamese agreement to surrender and meet the full U.S. political agenda, would have ended the bombing and war. Those hidden surrender conditions were secretly conveyed to the North Vietnamese.

But the U.S. mainstream media simply refused to recognize the not-very-hidden Johnson administration agenda and the PR purpose of these phony peace moves. They took the Johnson offers of supposedly “unrestricted talks” at face value, captured in James Reston’s statement in the New York Times, after an early bombing lull, that “The problem of peace lies now not in Washington but in Hanoi” Allowing these PR ploys to be genuine and putting the onus of their failure on the North Vietnamese was deeply dishonest but extremely serviceable to the war-makers, making it easier for them to escalate their violence in response to these North Vietnamese refusals to “negotiate” (i.e., surrender). (This PR fraud was discussed at length at the time in Edward S. Herman and Richard DuBoff’s *America’s Vietnam Policy: The Strategy of Deception* [Public Affairs: 1966] and Franz Schurmann et al., *The Politics of Escalation* [Fawcett: 1966]).

THE PHONY BUSH PEACE OFFER TO IRAN

The analogy with the Bush administration’s current offer to talk directly with Iran is close. The Bush administration has openly acknowledged that its aim is Iranian “regime change,” and it has engaged in a series of aggressive and provocative moves designed to achieve that outcome, including subsidizing internal dissidents within Iran, encouraging cross-border attacks from Iraq by Iranian expatriate terrorists, collecting data on Iranian targets by spy drones and on-the-ground incursions, and threatening to attack its latest target. It sabotaged the EU effort to negotiate a deal with Iran by refusing to agree to security guarantees to Iran as a part of the settlement. Why would it do that if its worry was only about Iran’s possible development of a nuclear weapons capability? But just as the media did-

EDWARD S. HERMAN – THE MEDIA BITES AGAIN

n't suggest a Johnson hidden agenda of surrender, so the media today refuse to focus on the agenda of regime change in interpreting the new offer even as it stares them in the face.

Given the objective of regime change, and the fact that the United States has been subject to criticism for its long unwillingness to negotiate with Iran, an obvious hypothesis is that, like the Johnson peace offers of the 1960s, the new U.S. offer is intended to be rejected while giving the cooperative media and “international community” a public relations bone to chew on. If the latter are sufficiently gullible they will congratulate the Bush administration for its new openness and allow the onus to be put on Iran if it rejects an offer intended to be rejected.

The Bush administration is only prepared to “negotiate” after Iran terminates its nuclear activities, the termination to be established by intensive inspections. Why should any conditions for negotiations be imposed on Iran? Why not just negotiate? Wouldn't the condition demanded by the Bush administration open the door to further U.S. insistence on endlessly intrusive inspections that never satisfied the Bushies in Iraq and could well stall “negotiations” with Iran indefinitely? Why should Iran have to make serious concessions in advance as a condition of negotiations and the United States make none? Ms. Rice has insisted on Iraq's suspension of nuclear activities on the ground that the administration doesn't want a gun pointed at its head, but as Selig Harrison points out, “then she points a gun at their head by saying that ‘all options are on the table.’”

(“It is time to put security issues on the table with Iran,” Financial Times, January 18, 2006, as posted to the website of the Center for International Policy).

But a good propaganda system will not ask such questions and will not find the new “offer” a cynical PR move intended to be rejected. On the contrary, it will credit Rice and Bush with “smart diplomacy” and a “rare victory” on the road to achieving the “only successful resolution worth talking about – a verifiable commitment by Iran not to develop the capacity to build nuclear weapons” (“What Counts on Iran,” NYT ed., June 3, 2006). If Iran rejects the propaganda ploy, “spurns that conciliatory approach, Washington is sure to put sanctions back on the international agenda.” This is same collection of editors who supported the Bush manipulation of facts and the inspection system on WMD to clear the ground for a military attack on Iraq; and here the editors follow closely in the footsteps of their predecessors during the Vietnam War who found the PR moves of that time genuine and helpfully putting the onus on the target for refusing to

EDWARD S. HERMAN – THE MEDIA BITES AGAIN

surrender. They are at it again.

Let me give a short list of the facts and considerations that the propaganda system must bypass and evade to laud the new “talks with conditions” propaganda ploy:

First, as noted, its members must ignore the real agenda, and pretend that the supposedly grave threat of Iranian nuclear weapons is the main issue, just as they swallowed the Bush claim that Iraq’s WMD and security threat to the United States was the main issue – and after this was found to be a fraud, the media very kindly allowed that the goal was Iraqi liberty. The media have accepted the nominal agenda as real and their premise across the board.

Second, they must ignore the fact that their government is already engaged in an aggression and preparing for its intensification against the supposedly threatening target (see Herman and Peterson, “The Fourth ‘Supreme International Crime’ in Seven Years Is Already Underway,” <http://www.coldtype.net/herman.html>). They did this in the Iraq case, where the year-long bombing campaign against Iraq prior to March 19, 2003, in violation of the UN Charter, was barely noticed and never condemned in the mainstream media. It is an absolute mainstream media rule that international law does not apply to their country, only to others—it has been pointed out, for example, that not a single New York Times editorial dealing with the invasion-occupation of Iraq ever mentioned international law or the UN Charter (Howard Friel and Richard Falk, *The Record of the Paper: How the New York Times Misreports US Foreign Policy*, London: Verso, 2004).

Third, given the low level U.S. attacks already underway and very real threat of larger-scale aggression, it is important that the media always implicitly deny a U.S. target like Iran any right of self defense. Phony security threats to the United States are taken seriously; the real threats posed by the United States to its targets do not exist. The media will not quote the conservative Israeli historian Martin van Creveld, who, after noting what the Americans had done to a nuclear-weaponless Iraq in 2003, wrote “Had the Iranians not tried to build nuclear weapons, they would be crazy.” (“Sharon on the warpath: Is Israel planning to attack Iran?” *International Herald Tribune*, August 21, 2004).

Fourth, the media must demonize the target as background for making its

EDWARD S. HERMAN – THE MEDIA BITES AGAIN

threat real and denying it any right to self-defense. Back in the good old days a tiny victim like Guatemala could be made a “tool of Soviet aggression,” and more recently it could be stressed that Saddam Hussein was a murderous killer (suppressing the fact that his worst abuses took place with U.S. support and under U.S. protection in the 1980s). Iran is now made into the world’s leading supporter of international terrorism, controlled by fanatical theocrats and with a leader who threatens to “wipe out” Israel.

But Iran hasn’t engaged in any border-crossing attacks on other countries, as the United States and Israel do regularly, in violation of the UN Charter. Nor can Iran compete with these two countries in support of terrorist states, armies, and individual and small group terrorists. [1] Furthermore, both the United States and Israel are heavily influenced by theocrats and fanatics; and the claim of a threat to “wipe out” Israel is based on a mistranslation. [2] Beyond this, Iran is in no position to wipe out Israel and wouldn’t be even with a small stock of nuclear weapons—whereas both the United States and Israel pose plausible threats to wipe out Iran. But answers to the demonization charge and the notion (and evidence) that this is a case of “demonization transference” is inadmissible in a propaganda system.

Fifth, the media must play down the fact that the United States abused the inspection process and UN in the run-up to the Iraq invasion, using them only as a cover for an already planned attack, smearing them as ineffectual and irrelevant insofar as they didn’t help clear the ground for the attack. The media cooperated fully in this manipulation-denigration process as regards Iraq (the classic article in the NYT illustrating this treatment of inspections and UN as a threat is Martin Indyk and Kenneth Pollack, “How the United States Can Avoid the Inspections Trap,” Jan. 27, 2003). Recalling that history would suggest questions about the integrity of the current U.S. use of the IAEA and the potential for its similar abuse in inspections that would obligate Iran to prove a negative. A patriotic media avoids this.

Sixth, the media must play down the fact that the United States itself is in violation of the NPT, in signing which this country pledged to work for the elimination of nuclear weapons. It is not only not doing this, it is developing new and “practicable” nuclear arms. As the United States stands alone in having used

EDWARD S. HERMAN – THE MEDIA BITES AGAIN

nuclear weapons on civilian populations, threatens to use them now, and is the only country in the world that can conceivably use them without deadly retaliation, common sense tells us that this is the really serious global nuclear threat – a direct threat and also an indirect one as the U.S. capability and threats compel all other countries to try to acquire nuclear weapons as a matter of self-defense.

Weapons of Terror, the report issued by a commission chaired by Hans Blix, the chief UN weapons inspector in Iraq at the time the United States launched its war in 2003, is of course highly relevant to the issues at stake in the Iran case, but because the report's message is largely hostile to the frame of the U.S.-stoked "crisis," the mainstream U.S. media have given it short shrift. Aside from a guest appearance on NBC-TV's Meet the Press, during which the program's host, Tim Russert, pressed Blix on his departure from the party line, featuring questions like, "Why blame the Americans?" (June 4), the Blix report received minimal coverage in the U.S. media, and even less in the U.K.[3] This is striking, because the report stresses that the "first barrier" to all weapons of mass destruction-related issues is a "political one," namely, the "development and maintenance of regional and global peaceful relations. Promoting peace is the prime means of avoiding both the acquisition and the retention of WMD (as well as other weapons)" (pp. 43-44). Of its 60 recommendations, the greatest emphasis falls on the world's most destructive weapons, with the most urgent recommendations directed at nuclear disarmament – a world free of nuclear weapons (see Annex 1, pp. 188-198). Toward this end, the report advocates one policy option after another designed to reduce the incentives to the non-nuclear-weapon states to acquire such weapons, including the resolution adopted in 1995 calling for the creation of a nuclear-weapon-free-zone in the Middle East. But as the United States and Israel reject these options, a good propaganda system will give such a report short shrift, and we have in the United States a very good propaganda system.

EDWARD S. HERMAN – THE MEDIA BITES AGAIN

ENDNOTES:

1. See Noam Chomsky, *Pirates and Emperors, Old and New: International terrorism in the Real World* (Boston: South End Press, 2002); William Blum, *Rogue State* (Monroe, Me.: Common Courage Press, 2005); Edward Herman, “Antiterrorism as a Cover for Terrorism”: <http://www.zmag.org/sustainers/content/2001-10\05herman.cfm>
2. See “Does Iran’s President Want Israel Wiped Off the Map?” Anneliese Fikentscher and Andreas Neumann (Trans. Erik Appleby, Information Clearinghouse, April 20, 2006); Jonathan Steele, “If Iran is ready to talk, the US must do so unconditionally,” *The Guardian*, June 2, 2006; David Peterson, “‘Weapons of Terror,’” *ZNet*, June 2, 2006.
3. In the major U.S. print media, coverage of the Blix commission’s report has been limited to the *New York Times* (Warren Hoge, June 2), *New York Sun* (Benny Avni, June 2), *Philadelphia Inquirer* (an op-ed that appeared under Blix’s byline, June 4), *Christian Science Monitor* (Peter Grier, June 5) and the *Washington Times* (John Zarocostas, June 5). In the major U.K. print media, there has been only a single report in *The Guardian* (David Batty, June 2)



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