

Senate panel debates Bolton nomination for UN ambassador post

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15 April 2005

The hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the nomination of John R. Bolton as US ambassador to the United Nations provided extensive evidence of two important political facts: the leading personnel of the Bush administration consist of thugs and liars, and the Democratic Party is incapable of any serious opposition to these political gangsters.

Even by the standards of the Bush White House, the nomination of Bolton, a virulent neo-conservative, protégé of ultra-right senator Jesse Helms, and longtime opponent of the UN, is a particularly brazen choice. His selection amounts to a declaration that the US government will brook no international opposition to its predatory designs. “You’re either with us or against us” is not just the mantra of the “war on terror,” but applies to the whole foreign policy of American imperialism.

The Bolton nomination continues the pattern in which officials who played a particularly flagrant role in the crimes of Bush’s first term are elevated to even higher posts in the second: e.g., Condoleezza Rice, Paul Wolfowitz, John Negroponte, Zalmay Khalilzad. Those who spread the lies about weapons of mass destruction and Al Qaeda links to Iraq, who supervised the administration of Afghanistan and Iraq as virtual US colonies, who bear responsibility for the deaths of hundreds of thousands in those two conquered countries, are moving on to greater things.

From 2001 to the present, Bolton served as assistant secretary of state for arms proliferation, making him effectively the number three man in the State Department, after Secretary of State Colin Powell and Powell’s longtime associate, Richard Armitage. Bolton’s fiefdom was regarded as a beachhead for the neo-conservatives, and Bolton was an ally of Wolfowitz, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Cheney in the internecine conflicts over policy in the upper reaches of the Bush administration. He played a prominent and particularly provocative role in using the issue of nuclear and non-conventional arms proliferation as a pretext for stigmatizing and threatening targeted regimes, such as Iran, North Korea and Cuba.

Prior to joining the State Department, Bolton had a long record as a fervent opponent of the United Nations and critic of any subordination of American policy to international law. In one widely quoted speech, he declared that if ten floors of the United Nations headquarters in New York were to disappear, the world would never miss them. He characterized the UN as a fiction, declaring in the 1994 speech, “There is no United Nations. There is an international community that occasionally can be led by the only real power left in the world—that’s the United States—when it suits our interests and when we can get others to go along.”

Bolton’s own testimony before the Senate panel on April 11 was largely uneventful. He seemed unnaturally restrained, giving low-key answers to questions by Democratic senators who hoped to provoke a typical outburst.

The second day’s testimony gave an insight into what such an outburst would look like. The former chief of the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Carl Ford, described Bolton as a “bully” whose behavior “brings real questions to my mind about his suitability for high office.”

Ford, now retired, described himself as a Bush supporter, a “huge fan” of Vice President Cheney, and “as conservative as John Bolton is.” He denied his criticisms had anything to do with policy differences over the war in Iraq. He then went on to relate an incident in which Bolton, angered when a lower-level analyst objected to his plan to give a speech charging that Cuba possessed a secret bio-weapons program, summoned the aide to his office, screaming at the top of his lungs. When the analyst refused to back down, reiterating that there was no evidence of such a program, Bolton tried to have him fired.

“Secretary Bolton chose to reach five or six levels below him in the bureaucracy, bring an analyst into his office and give him a tongue-lashing,” Ford said, calling Bolton “a quintessential kiss-up, kick-down kind of guy.” Ford continued: “He’s got a bigger kick, and it gets bigger and

stronger the further down the bureaucracy he's kicking. And he stands out. I don't have any other example to give you of someone who acts this way."

Ford said that he refused to fire the analyst and was upheld by Secretary of State Powell, but the incident nonetheless served as an example of intimidation and was widely discussed within the foreign policy bureaucracy.

Bolton was asked about a similar incident involving an unnamed CIA analyst for Latin America who refused to tailor his intelligence reports to the policy preferences of Bolton and then-assistant secretary of state for Latin American affairs, Otto Reich, a notorious Cuban-American rightist and supporter of terrorist attacks against Cuba and Nicaragua. Bolton visited CIA headquarters to try to have the analyst removed, again unsuccessfully, in another example of bullying and intimidation that became notorious within the intelligence agency.

The new secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, came to Bolton's defense after Ford's testimony. Citing the description by Ford of "tirades," "finger-shaking" and Bolton going "red in the face," Rice issued a statement: "That is certainly not the John Bolton I know." Rice declined to name Bolton her deputy—the promotion he really desired—when she took over the State Department, at least in part because of warnings from Senate Republicans that he might be difficult to confirm in that position.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee postponed a planned vote on Bolton's nomination after Ford's testimony, although Chairman Richard Lugar said that he was confident Bolton would be approved next week by a 10-8 party-line vote. Only one Republican committee member, Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island, has indicated any reservations about the nomination, and Chafee declared after the hearings that he was inclined to vote to send Bolton's name to the full Senate for confirmation.

Lugar ordered the delay despite rejecting a request from Senator Christopher Dodd, a Connecticut Democrat, to hold an additional day of hearings for testimony from four more witnesses to Bolton's treatment of analysts. The postponement will give senators time to read the statements these witnesses gave to committee staffers, but they will not testify publicly.

Dodd raised a new issue in the course of his questioning of Bolton. He asked the State Department official if he had used his position to get information on communications involving other US government officials that had been intercepted by the National Security Agency, the top secret spy agency that monitors international telecommunications. Dodd asked "whether or not you requested to see NSA information about any other American officials."

Bolton replied, "The answer to that is yes," but claimed

his purpose had been "to better understand" a summary of the intercepted conversation, adding that in some cases, "it's important to find out who is saying what to whom."

Both Dodd and Bolton were careful not to disclose which US government official was the subject of Bolton's interest. Two possibilities suggest themselves. Most likely, he was seeking to use the largest US spy agency to sniff out dissenting opinion within the ranks of the State Department. Alternately, his role as the neo-conservative agent inside the State Department was more than figurative, and he was seeking to spy on the discussions of Powell himself, or his deputy Armitage. Either alternative points to the bitterness of the conflicts and the truly Byzantine character of the internal life of the court of George W. Bush.

Dodd's reluctance to press the point after this potentially damning admission—he asked only a single question on the subject—typifies the timid and halfhearted character of the Democratic opposition to Bolton's nomination. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee cannot meet without at least one Democrat present, so a unanimous boycott would delay if not torpedo the nomination. The Democrats control 45 of the 100 seats in the Senate, enough to easily sustain a filibuster of the nomination, but Minority Leader Harry Reid has not given his support to such an action.

The Democratic reservations about Bolton revolve more around style than substance. They object to such an open, avowed opponent of the United Nations being named the US ambassador to the international body, on the grounds that it will be taken as a US provocation. But they support the policy of unilateral American military intervention propounded by Bush in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. And they back Bush's refusal to submit the United States to the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, which would make American officials potential subjects of war crimes prosecution for their conduct in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Guantánamo Bay concentration camp.

In other words, the Democrats support a US foreign policy based on bullying and gangsterism, but draw the line at nominating to a high diplomatic post an official who acts like a bully and a gangster. The personification of this two-faced and unserious approach was Senator Barbara Boxer of California, who suggested that Bolton needed "anger management" training.



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