

As war clouds gather: Democrats back covert US attacks on Iran

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Leading congressional Democrats have given their approval to a vastly expanded program of US covert warfare against Iran, according to an article by investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, published in the *New Yorker*, and made available on the magazine's web site Sunday. (See "Preparing the Battlefield—The Bush Administration steps up its secret moves against Iran")

President Bush issued a Presidential Finding, a classified notification to top congressional leaders about the covert program against Iran, last year, after the Democrats took control of the Senate and House of Representatives in the November 2006 elections. The Finding called for a series of operations, including funding of separatist groups working among Iran's Arab and Baluchi minorities, as well as the kidnapping of members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard for interrogation across the border in Iraq and targeting individuals within Iran for assassination.

Hersh reports that Bush carried out the legal requirement that he notify the Democratic and Republican leaders in the House and Senate, as well as the chairman and ranking members of the intelligence committees. The four Democrats are House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, Senate Intelligence Committee chairman Jay Rockefeller, and House Intelligence Committee chairman Silvestre Reyes.

Hersh writes, "Congress does have the means to challenge the White House once it has been sent a Finding. It has the power to withhold funding for any government operation. The members of the House and Senate Democratic leadership who have access to the Finding can also, if they choose to do so, and if they have shared concerns, come up with ways to exert their influence on Administration policy."

Nothing of the kind took place. None of the four congressional Democrats took any steps to forestall the covert action campaign against Iran, and the \$400 million was quietly approved without public notice. Nor would any of the four comment to Hersh for his June 29 article in the *New Yorker*. The Democrats prefer to keep secret their collaboration with the Bush administration's violations of

international law.

This revelation demonstrates the complete insincerity of the "antiwar" posture adopted by the Democrats in the 2006 election and in the current 2008 presidential campaign. While appealing for the votes of the vast majority of Americans who oppose both the ongoing war in Iraq and a new war against Iran, the Democrats are quietly preparing to continue the same policy if, as now seems likely, they regain the White House in the November election.

Hersh seems to suggest a conflict between the congressional Democrats and the party's presidential nominee, Senator Barack Obama. He writes: "the funding for the escalation was approved. In other words, some members of the Democratic leadership ... were willing, in secret, to go along with the Administration in expanding covert activities directed at Iran, while the Party's presumptive candidate for President, Barack Obama, has said that he favors direct talks and diplomacy."

There is no reason to believe that there is an actual conflict between Obama and the congressional Democrats over the campaign of covert action against Iran. It is more a matter of a division of labor. Obama emphasizes diplomacy and the peaceful resolution of differences, as part of an electoral campaign aimed at deceiving the American people. The congressional Democrats, who now share responsibility with the Bush White House for US government policy, must do what is required to defend the interests of American imperialism in the region.

Obama is already on record as proposing a more aggressive American military posture in Afghanistan and on the Afghan-Pakistan border, declaring that he will move troops from Iraq to Afghanistan and authorize cross-border strikes against purported Al Qaeda sites in Pakistan, with or without the permission of the Pakistani government.

He is also reportedly considering keeping Defense Secretary Robert Gates at his post in a new Obama administration. The *Times* of London wrote Sunday, "Obama's top foreign policy and national security advisers are pressing the case for keeping Robert Gates at the

Pentagon after he won widespread praise for his performance. The move would be in keeping with Obama's desire to appoint a cabinet of all the talents."

Richard Danzig, a former navy secretary and Obama's top military adviser, told the newspaper, "My personal position is Gates is a very good secretary of defense and would be an even better one in an Obama administration." The newspaper commented that "retaining Gates would give Obama 'cover' for adjusting his policy" in relation to the war in Iraq—i.e., to renege on his pledges to end the war and instead continue the US occupation indefinitely.

Gates has extended his own olive branches to the Democrats, appointing two former Clinton administration officials to the Defense Policy Board last year: John Hamre, who was named chairman, and Clinton's former defense secretary William Perry, who is now among Obama's top national security advisers. The result is a direct line of communication between the Pentagon and the Obama campaign.

The Hersh article comes amid mounting tensions in the Middle East, with repeated public threats of military action against Iran by either Israel or the United States or both, and warnings from Iranian officials that they will retaliate forcefully against such an assault.

Earlier this month the Israeli air force conducted a full-scale dress rehearsal for air strikes against Tehran, sending warplanes on a 1,500-kilometer flight against mock targets in the Mediterranean Sea. Bush administration officials leaked reports on the military exercise to the media, in a clear attempt to intimidate the Iranian regime, as well as prepare US and world public opinion for such a strike.

Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, the country's strongest military force, warned Saturday that in the event of US or Israeli attack, Iran would consider closing off the sea lanes through the Strait of Hormuz used by tankers supplying the world with Persian Gulf oil. "Naturally every country under attack by an enemy uses all its capacity and opportunities to confront the enemy," he told the Iranian newspaper *Jaam-e Jam*, according to the official Fars News Agency.

"Iran will definitely act to impose control on the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz," he said. "After this action, the oil price will rise very considerably and this is among the factors deterring the enemies."

Three British newspapers carried reports Sunday of a further intensification of the war atmosphere:

* The *Sunday Telegraph* interviewed Shabtai Shavit, a former head of the Israeli secret service Mossad, who suggested that Israel might strike unilaterally against Iran after the US presidential election, especially if Senator Barack Obama wins. He suggested that Iran was a year or

less from building its first nuclear weapon, and that Israeli military action would be driven by that timetable. "The time that is left ... is getting shorter," he said.

* The *Guardian* reported that Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert held a meeting at his official residence with Aviam Sela, the organizer of the 1981 Israel airstrike that destroyed the Iraqi nuclear facility at Osirak, to discuss the practical aspects of a similar assault on Iran.

* The *Times* of London reported that in response to these threats, Iran has targeted its most powerful long-range ballistic missiles, the Shahab-3B, with a range of up to 2,000 kilometers, against locations in Israel, including the principal Israeli nuclear research facility at Dimona in the Negev desert.

The US covert action campaign inside Iran involves both the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon's Joint Special Operations Command, Hersh writes. As in previous exposés by the veteran journalist—the first to report US war crimes ranging from the My Lai massacre nearly 40 years ago to torture at Abu Ghraib in 2004—his sources are disaffected sections of the military-intelligence apparatus, particularly in the CIA.

Hersh reports a conflict between the CIA and the White House over the language in the Presidential Finding, with the CIA demanding explicit authorization for the use of deadly force by US operatives engaged in covert action inside Iran, while the White House claimed that Bush's authority as commander-in-chief was sufficient.

One of those interviewed is the former head of the US Central Command, now-retired Admiral William Fallon, fired by Defense Secretary Robert Gates earlier this year after a profile in *Vanity Fair* magazine depicted Fallon as an in-house opponent of a US war against Iran.

Citing comments from several former intelligence and military officials, Hersh describes an increasingly bitter struggle within the US government, with the office of Vice President Richard Cheney playing the lead role in demanding a more aggressive campaign of provocations and a broader list of targets. One former official told Hersh of a meeting in the Vice President's office: "The subject was how to create a *casus belli* between Tehran and Washington."



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