

For those who pay attention to Middle Eastern relations, things got a little weird a couple of months ago when George W. Bush—the same man who not long ago referred to Iran as part of the "axis of evil" and who, in his second inaugural address, vowed to rid the world of despots—started offering the Islamic Republic incentives to halt its nuclear program. You had to wonder, why the sudden change in tone? What is real here and what is smoke?

The number of people in America truly knowledgeable about Iran is very small, and as I tried to get a sense of where things were heading, I found myself being directed again and again to the same group—former CIA agents who'd covered that region, people at the State Department with access to intelligence, and several Iranian Americans who go back and forth between the two countries. At a bar filled with drunken frat boys, one State official told me unequivocally, "The intelligence community, since 2003, has been very clear in its assessment that regime change is unlikely in Iran." This was later echoed by a former CIA official, who said, "Our hands are so full with Iraq intelligence, reality should confront us." Indeed, in March, leaks from a presidential commission revealed that American intelligence on Iran was so weak that no informed judgments—the kind, say, you'd like to be able to make if you were planning on fostering an internal revolution or launching a military strike—could be made about the country.

This all jibed with my own sense of things—that it was a little unreasonable to consider toppling Iran while Iraq is still in such disarray. And it seemed that the administration, in the face of these realities, was uncharacteristically turning to the carrot instead of the stick.

Seemed. Beneath the surface of the happy talk, I soon learned, a core group of powerful hawks inside and outside the government were hard at work planning how to take Iran down. For them, Iraq was—is—just part of a larger mission, and what some see as failure (Iraq's recent elections notwithstanding, a majority of Americans now think the invasion was a mistake) they see as a learning experience. Karen Kwiatkowski, a former Pentagon official who in 2003 left its Directorate for Near East and South Asian Affairs, which was closely involved in Iraq war planning, put it to me this way: "The neocons' score sheet is just different. Their stakes are longer and bigger."

Their minds are not primarily concerned with whether or not our intelligence is airtight; the much more pressing concerns are that Iran, which is significantly larger than Iraq, is closer to getting a nuke; it also happens to be much better positioned than Iraq to tilt the entire region toward democracy and help guarantee the security of the United States. "Iraq makes zero sense unless you look at the problem in regional terms," said Meyrav Wurmser, who directs the Center for Middle East Policy at the Hudson Institute and is close to many administration officials. "There's no transformation without regime change in Iran."

Neocons like Wurmser point out that a nuclear-armed Iran could spark an arms race in the region, prompting Saudi Arabia or other enemies of Iran to build their own nukes, and could put bombs in the hands of Iran-backed Hezbollah. Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former CIA case officer who covered Iran and has become a prominent voice among the neocon hawks, stated it in stark—and, I must say, convincing—terms: "We can't tolerate Tehran with a bomb," he said. "That's the bottom line. That's it."

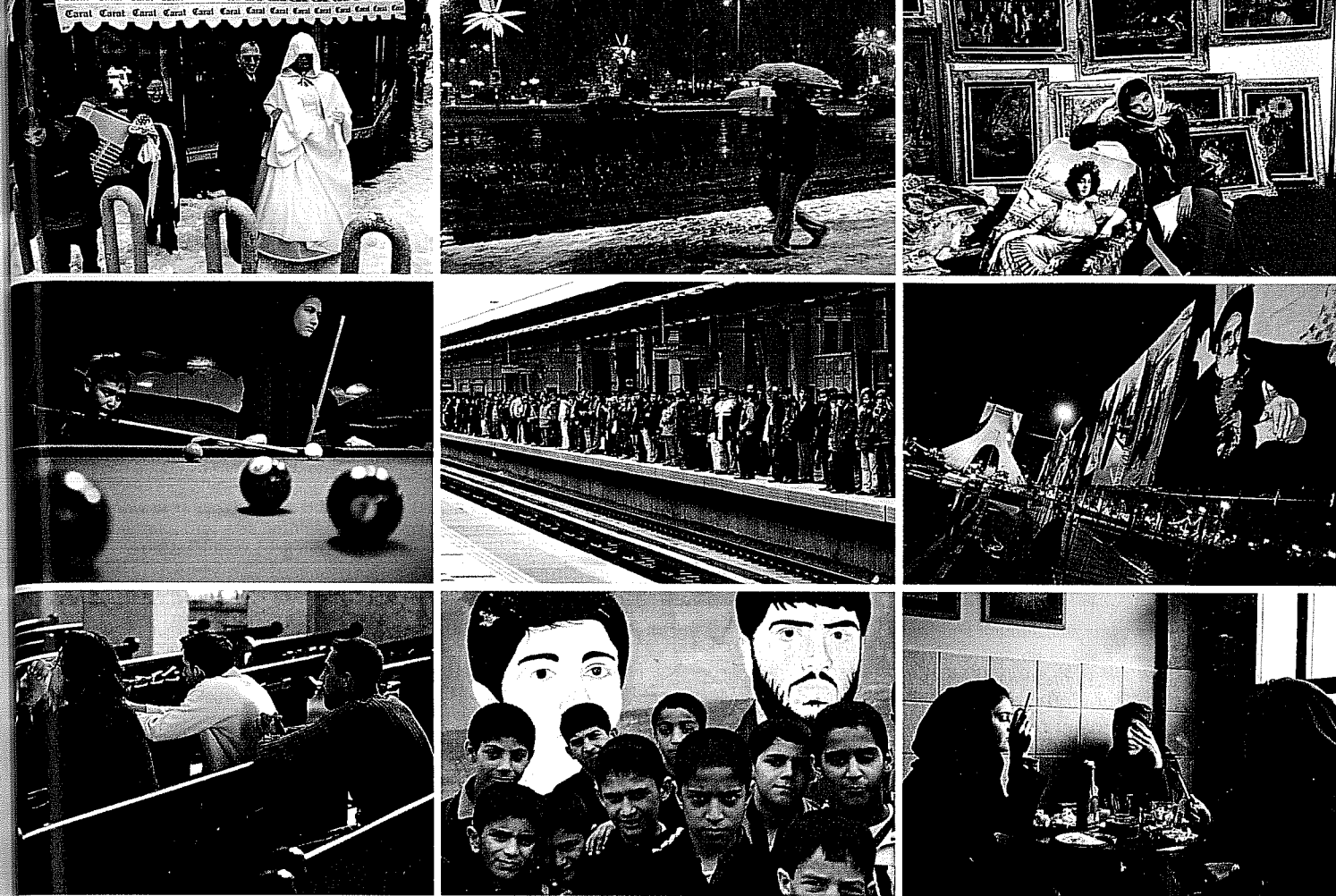
During Bush's first four years, the United States never explicitly embraced a harder line toward Iran. Afghanistan and Iraq came first, and then Secretary of State Colin Powell, along with his powerful deputy Richard Armitage, often blocked tougher talk about Iran. The administration, led by Powell and Armitage, publicly backed European talks with Tehran about peacefully suspending the country's nuclear program.

Even today, official U.S. policy remains that no one is actively planning regime change in Iran and that the U.S. government supports Europe's continuing talks with the Iranians. But in Washington, there's official policy and unofficial policy, and then one day, sometimes

to the public's surprise, the unofficial becomes official. What I wanted to understand was how that transformation takes place.

Not long ago, I took a taxi across D.C. to a prominent conservative think tank to meet a former Defense official I'll call Eli. An intense man in his mid-thirties, Eli has quietly traveled the innards of the Middle East for years, unguarded, smoking bubbles with the enemies of America. During his years at Defense, he was one of the most vociferous advocates of getting tough with the mullahs. Now in the private sector, Eli has continued to press his ideas, slipping memos on Iran directly into the hands of policymakers. As we sat in his office, the walls of which were covered in menacing posters of the ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei and other Muslim clerics, Eli told me that he'd wanted to take a stronger approach in Bush's first term. "But every time we got going, we were blocked by State and CIA. They were just long-winded bullshitters, treating Iran like some academic problem." The more he talked about this, the redder his face turned, and at one point he stood up and began to pace around his office. When I brought up Armitage—in 2003, Armitage contended, ludicrously, that Iran was a democracy—Eli grimaced in anger.

Building the case for going after Iran entails crushing anyone who thinks it's possible to bargain with the mullahs. To this end, Powell was essentially pushed out by Bush (and Armitage went with him), and Bush ally Porter Goss has taken over the CIA. During the Iraq war, agents filed scathing reports on administration policy, and upon his arrival Goss openly warned agents not to "identify with, support, or champion opposition to the administration or its policies." Before long, high-ranking CIA officials who clashed with Goss started "resigning." Vince Cannistraro, a former top intelligence official, told me, "All the cautionary roadblocks have been taken out of the way of the hard-liners."



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Despite the administration's lip service in support of European diplomacy, the hard-liners' plan also requires the scuttling of any deals with the ruling mullahs that the Europeans put on the table. According to one State Department official I recently spoke with, when Tim Guldemann, then Swiss ambassador to Iran (who served as the link between the United States and Iran), came to Washington in the spring of 2003, he brought with him a possible offer from Tehran—a "grand bargain" in which the United States would open relations with Iran and, in return, Iran would give up its nuclear-enrichment program. "The Pentagon and the National Security Council learned about it," the State Department official told me. "There was no hashing this out. They said, 'No, no discussion on this.' That was it."

Then, in summer 2004, a group of top European diplomats arrived on Capitol Hill for a closed meeting with the House Committee on International Relations. According to one congressional aide who participated, the Europeans entered the room and suggested continuing negotiations with Tehran. Members of the committee took turns excoriating them. "They dressed them down," the aide said, "and told the EU ambassadors that their approach had already failed." At first, the European diplomats, startled by this hostile response, apologized for not having already clinched a deal with Iran, and they promised they

could still hammer one out. The room only got angrier. "We said to them, 'What are the American people going to say when there's a dirty Iranian nuke in the U.S. and we tell them that our European allies facilitated this?'" the aide said. "The Europeans got all flustered and said, 'How could you say that?'" The meeting went downhill from there. Soon, several congressmen were reminding the Europeans of their painful history dealing with dictators. "We raised the issue of their appeasement [of Hitler]," the aide recalled, laughing. "That went over well."

Several days after meeting Eli, I went to visit Michael Ledeen, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank that is home to many highly influential policy hawks. Ledeen has worked in and out of government for over two decades. During the Reagan administration, he was involved in the Iran-contra scandal, and his expertise is reportedly treasured by Karl Rove. Throughout our conversation, Ledeen chewed on a thick cigar and reminisced about flying planes in Mozambique. (During the Cold War, he also worked in Africa, where he was close to right-wing insurgents like Angola's Jonas Savimbi.) "It's all one thing," Ledeen said. "Iran, Iraq, the whole region." Though smoking is banned in the building, he stubbed out his cigar and then lit another. "Revolu-

In the streets of Tehran, Iranians are divided between conservatives, who cling to the values of Islamic revolution, and the disaffected, many of them Iranian youths and women. Proponents of regime change believe—or hope—that in the wake of U.S. intervention, this latter group would rise up in opposition to the mullahs.

tion shouldn't be limited to one part of the Middle East," he went on, "and I'm for revolution." He then assured me, in case there was any doubt, that his opinion was shared by the man who matters most. "In private," Ledeen said, "Bush calls for a single solution to the whole Middle East. The president says, 'Iran is the very big problem.' He wags his finger and says, 'We're going to take care of that.'"

To understand what's really happening regarding Iran, it's worth revisiting how the political groundwork was laid for the Iraq war—because the old playbook is out again.

During the late 1990s, while most of America was debating the precise nature of the sex Bill Clinton had had with Monica