

The Gulf of Sneezes

by Jeffrey Steinberg

A survey of senior U.S. military, intelligence, and diplomatic specialists confirms that the Bush-Cheney Administration is presently on a course towards provoking a military confrontation with Iran sometime before the end of the Spring of 2007. Were such a lunatic provocation to go unchecked in the immediate days and weeks ahead, the planet would be plunged into perpetual war, and financial and economic chaos, that could take generations to undo. One certain consequence of a U.S.-provoked war with Iran would be the total destruction of the United States as the sovereign republic of the Founding Fathers, and the demonization of the U.S.A. in the eyes of what might remain of the population of the rest of the world.

The simplest and most elegant way to stop this madness is for Vice President Dick Cheney, the thug-in-chief of this Persian Gulf war drive, to be forced out of office this month. As of this writing, four separate House resolutions are being offered, to prevent military action against Iran without prior Congressional deliberation and full authorization. Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.V.) has a similar resolution in the Senate. The weakness of all of these well-intentioned efforts, however, is that none specify that an act of war against Iran, without prior Congressional authorization, would constitute an *impeachable offense* by both President Bush and Vice President Cheney. Under the present conditions of Bush-Cheney Executive branch madness and intransigence, only such blunt language, backed up by a clear commitment to act, could contribute to actual war avoidance.

It is an open secret that growing legions of leading Republican strategists and financial angels are coming to the conclusion that Cheney has to go—or else the GOP may not survive the 2008 election cycle. Increasingly, according to sources close to the Bush family, there is despair that the President is incapable of facing the reality that Dick Cheney has been the source of every policy fiasco of the past six years, and that Cheney's timely departure is the only "exit strategy" available to Dubya, if he wishes not to go down in history as the worst American President of all time. As of this writing, the President is the runaway leading contender for that dubious distinction.

A 'Sneeze' Can Start a War

Military and intelligence sources with decades of experience in the Persian Gulf have warned *EIR* that once the second U.S. naval carrier group, led by the *USS Stennis*, arrives in

the Persian Gulf sometime in the second half of February, there will be such a concentration of American and Iranian naval equipment in that narrow area, that "a sneeze" could start a conflagration. By "sneeze," these experts meant that naval commanders—American and Iranian—at the tactical level, operating in close quarters in poorly defined border areas of the Gulf, could carry out provocative actions that trigger a general war—without necessarily intending to do so.

According to one retired Persian Gulf commander, prior to the 1991 "Operation Desert Storm," no U.S. carrier groups were deployed into the Persian Gulf, precisely because the danger of blundering into a war was considered too great to justify the risk. Large-scale naval assets assigned to the Persian Gulf region were based in the Indian Ocean and in other nearby locations as a kind of fail-safe measure.

War Has Already Been Declared

In some respects, the Bush Administration has already issued a de facto, unconstitutional declaration of war. On Jan. 10, 2007, as President Bush was delivering his nationwide television address, announcing the "surge" of U.S. troops in Iraq, American Special Forces commandos were raiding the Iranian consular office in the Kurdish city of Irbil. The American soldiers arrested five Iranian officials, and accused them of providing support to the insurgents battling American and coalition forces in Iraq. As one retired senior American diplomat put it, "This was an act of war" on the part of the Bush Administration.

In his Jan. 10 speech, the President placed great emphasis on Iran's and Syria's purported roles in backing the insurgency. The President used a legalistic term, "material support for the insurgency," to describe the Iranian and Syrian actions. As the actions in Irbil demonstrated, the Bush Administration has decided to take a direct and aggressive approach to Iran's presence inside Iraq—regardless of the actual level of proof of Iran's involvement in backing insurgents and providing military hardware. According to some sources, Iranian Revolutionary Guard assets may have been engaged inside Iraq in provocative actions against the American and coalition occupation forces. But by refusing to engage in any kind of diplomatic efforts, and by highlighting Iran's longstanding presence inside neighboring Iraq, the Bush-Cheney Administration has adopted a willful plan to, in effect, back into a full-scale war against Iran.

Since the President's Jan. 10 speech and the "act of war" in Irbil, other provocative actions by the Bush Administration have piled up. On Jan. 31, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the U.S. Air Force is increasing patrols along the Iran-Iraq border, aimed at cutting off the flow of arms and Revolutionary Guard operatives into Iraq. The combination of these intensified border sorties, which could result in strikes against Iranian territory, and the U.S. naval buildup in the Gulf, have many people worried. The *Times* quoted an unnamed American military officer: "A mistake could be made and you could



U.S. Navy/Ron Reeves



EIRNS/Stuart Lewis

The carrier USS John C. Stennis on Jan. 22, preparing to head for the Persian Gulf. Vice President Cheney remains committed to war against Iran; only his ouster can make sure it won't happen.

end up in something that neither side ever really wanted, and suddenly it's August 1914 all over again." He gave a barely hypothetical example: "A boat crosses a line . . . but what does it mean? You've got to be very careful about overreacting."

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was equally blunt in an interview with CNN on Jan. 31, when he said, "We have told the Iranians and the Americans, 'We know that you have a problem with each other, but we're asking you, please, solve your problems outside of Iraq.' We do not want the American forces to take Iraq as a base to attack Iran. . . . We will not accept Iran using Iraq to attack American forces. But does this exist? It exists and I assure you it exists."

WMD Gambit Dropped

According to one senior U.S. intelligence official, White House "spin doctors" concluded late last year that the Administration had been so discredited by the fraudulent claims about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction stockpiles, that no one would buy into a war against Iran on the basis of Administration claims that the Islamic Republic was on the verge of fielding nuclear weapons. At that time, the official rhetoric of Bush and Cheney shifted to an emphasis on Iran's interference in American counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq. While the White House has so far failed to provide any detailed evidence that Iran is behind the escalating insurgency, the temperature of the Administration rhetoric has jumped to a fever pitch. Recently, the President acknowledged that he issued an intelligence finding in Autumn 2006, authorizing American forces in Iraq to target Iranian assets inside Iraqi territory.

On Jan. 20, five American soldiers were killed in a sophisticated attack, by armed men disguised as Iraqi security officers, who spoke English. The Bush Administration has blamed the incident on Iran, claiming that Iraqi Shi'ite insurgents are not sophisticated enough on their own, to have car-

ried out such an attack. Yet the Bush Administration has still not released its long-promised report about Iranian involvement, and the latest National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) says essentially that other countries are *not* responsible for what's going on inside Iraq. The readiness of the Bush Administration to jump to conclusions about the Iranian hand behind every significant insurgent action just underscores the war fever that has spread around 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

It is in this context that the pending arrival of a massive new American naval force into the Persian Gulf represents the potential for what one senior retired U.S. Marine officer called a "Gulf of Tonkin II" nightmare.

A Unilateral Strike

The naval buildup also will soon put the United States in the position of being able to launch significant strikes against Iran without relying on any Persian Gulf states to provide basing or overflight support. It is no secret that the Iranian government has warned all of the major states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, including Saudi Arabia, that any support for an American attack on Iran will be met with a serious irregular warfare response. Kuwait and Bahrain, two GCC states with significant U.S. Air Force presence, are highly vulnerable to such Iranian-directed asymmetric warfare, given the sizeable Shi'ite minorities in both countries.

In recent days, Iran and Saudi Arabia have exchanged diplomatic missions, clearly aimed at avoiding a confrontation. (See article in *International*.)

However, the pending arrival of the *USS Stennis* in the waters of the Persian Gulf will soon trump all of those efforts. Given the unpredictable situation in Tehran, nothing short of decisive action—the removal of Vice President Cheney—can assure the world that a "sneeze" will not start World War III.