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Why has the United States not bombed Iran? The domestic politics of America's response to Iran's nuclear programme

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Why has the United States not bombed Iran? The domestic politics of America's response to Iran's nuclear programme

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Abstract *Why has the United States (US), under both the Bush and Obama administrations, refrained from attacking Iran even though US officials have depicted the Iranian threat in all but apocalyptic terms and even though a loud chorus in Washington has been persistently calling for a preventive strike against Iran? I present an analysis—informed by Graham Allison's famous bureaucratic politics model—of the main political and bureaucratic forces in Washington acting to promote or impede a preventive attack on Iran's nuclear sites. I argue that America's abstention from attacking Iran should be understood not as a coherent national response to Iran's nuclear programme but rather as (in Allison's terms) an 'intra-national political outcome' resulting from the 'pulling' of 'Iran Threat' interests—primarily Vice President Cheney's camp in the Bush White House, members of Congress, and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC)—and the countervailing 'hauling' of the Pentagon, the military's top brass, the intelligence community and the Department of State. The main reason why neither the Bush nor the Obama administration has opted for a military strike is that the 'haulers', who were led by a formidable bureaucratic-political player, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, have had the upper hand over the hawkish 'pullers'.*

What the nation does is sometimes the result of the triumph of one group over others. (Allison 1969, 707)

Since the end of the Cold War, successive United States (US) administrations have depicted the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Third World as a grave threat to America's security. The National Security Strategy formulated by the George HW Bush administration in August 1991 anticipated that, 'As we put the main elements of European and East–West arms control into place, attention will increasingly turn to other regional and global arms control objectives. None is more urgent than stopping the global proliferation of nuclear, chemical and

Because this article analyses current events, it is worth noting that the manuscript's first draft was completed in November 2010 and that it was revised for publication in July 2011. I thank Professor Nurşin Güney of Yildiz Technical University for inviting me to Istanbul to present this paper at a conference on Middle Eastern security. For helpful feedback and research tips I am indebted to Aaron Karp, Kemal Kirişçi, Vişne Korkmaz, John Mearsheimer, Benoit Pelopidas, Majid Sharifi and two anonymous reviewers.

biological weapons, as well as the missiles to deliver them' (US White House 1991). The Clinton administration characterized weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as 'the greatest potential threat to global security' and it identified three 'proliferation zones' as 'particularly critical' concerns: the Korean Peninsula, South Asia, and Iran and Iraq (US White House 1997). The George W Bush administration invaded one of these proliferation zones to eliminate what it portrayed as the grave danger posed by Iraqi WMD.

Neither the fact that the US 'had been surprised by India's nuclear explosions' in 1998 nor the surprising discovery that Iraq had no WMD at the time of the American invasion has shaken the confidence of Washington's nonproliferation advocates in their ability to peer into the nuclear sanctums of other nations, particularly Iran (Crossette 1998). Nor has Washington's grim assessment of the dangers of proliferation been tempered by the fact that the introduction of nuclear weapons into South Asia and the Korean Peninsula did not result in the dire consequences predicted by experts.¹ American officials continue to regard nuclear proliferation as a critical danger, Iran's nuclear programme having supplanted Iraq's WMD as the greatest menace to regional and arguably global peace. The fact that the 'mushroom cloud' rhetoric preceding the Iraq War proved to be hollow has not stopped American leaders from representing the Iranian nuclear programme in almost equally alarmist terms.² President George W Bush declared that the US 'will not tolerate the construction of a nuclear weapon' in Iran and he later warned that Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons could put the Middle East 'under the shadow of a nuclear holocaust' (Sanger 2003; Reid 2007). During his presidential campaign Barack Obama similarly stated that 'We cannot allow Iran to get a nuclear weapon. It would be a game-changer in the region' (*New York Times* 2008). Obama's Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that a nuclear-armed Iran was 'unacceptable' (Haaretz 2010) and that, if the Iranians 'get a nuclear weapons programme, that will launch an arms race in the Middle East the likes of which we've never seen'.³ And Obama's special assistant for nonproliferation, Gary Samore, warned in October 2010 that the acquisition of a nuclear weapon by Iran 'would have an utterly catastrophic effect' in the Middle East (Sanger 2010a).

In light of these all but apocalyptic assessments of the Iranian nuclear threat, it is not surprising that the US government has engaged in detailed military planning and that both the Bush and Obama administrations have indirectly

¹ Diplomats and arms control experts see this arms race as particularly dangerous because Pakistan and India, unlike the United States and Russia during the cold war, have not held serious negotiations over outstanding problems for decades ... These experts now fear that Pakistan and India could be drawn into a nuclear war over Kashmir ... They also worry that nuclear testing by India and Pakistan could encourage other nations that have long sought nuclear arms to acquire these weapons. "We are at perhaps the most dangerous period since the beginning of the nuclear age—with the exception of the Cuban missile crisis," said Thomas Graham, a former negotiator for the United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency' (Crossette 1998).

² Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated in September 2002 that 'we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud', <<http://archives.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/09/08/iraq.debate/>>.

³ Interview with Vladimir Pozner of First Channel Television in Russia, 19 March 2010, <www.america.gov/st/texttrans-English/2010/March/20100322175730eafas0.2136914.html&distid=ucs>, accessed 10 April 2010.

threatened to use force against Iran (Hersh 2006; Baxter 2007). President Bush declared in 2005 (and on several other occasions) that 'All options are on the table. The use of force [against Iran] is the last option for any president and, you know, we've used force in the recent past to secure our country' (*Los Angeles Times* 2005). 'I will do everything that's required to prevent' Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, Barack Obama promised during his presidential campaign, adding that 'we will never take military options off the table' (*New York Times* 2008; see also Zeleny 2008). Secretary of State Clinton reassured the Senate in her confirmation hearing that 'we are not taking any option off the table at all' and President Obama reiterated in an interview with Fox News in March 2010 that 'we haven't taken any options off the table' (Cohen 2009; Sanger 2010b). A few months later a group of journalists was invited to the White House to be briefed that, as Obama's chief of staff Rahm Emanuel put it, 'the expression "all options are on the table" means that all options are on the table' (Goldberg 2010). As the *New York Times* explained, this phrase 'hint(s) that military options are still possible' (Sanger 2010b).

If administration officials have typically used coded language to refer to attacking Iran, a significant number of hawkish think tank experts, commentators and members of Congress have spoken out on the subject in blunter terms. 'We must bomb Iran,' opined Joshua Muravchik (2006), and Norman Podhoretz (2007) wrote that 'there is no alternative to the actual use of force [against Iran]—anymore than there was an alternative to force if Hitler was to be stopped in 1938'. As David Kenner (2010) observed, 'after months of puzzlement over what to do about developments in the Islamic Republic', the 'Bomb Iran' hawks 'returned to the political center stage' in mid-2009 (for example, Bolton 2009; Boot 2009; Pipes 2010). Significantly, however, tough talk on Iran has spread beyond the confines of neoconservative circles or the Republican Party. In early 2010 the president of the centrist, nonpartisan Council on Foreign Relations, Richard Haass, urged the administration to actively seek to topple the regime in Tehran (Haass 2010); Haass subsequently said on CNN that the US 'ought to look ... seriously' at preventive strikes against Iran.⁴ Senator Charles Schumer (Democrat, New York) told the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in March 2010 that 'we cannot, must not, will not' allow Iran to realize its 'aggressive nuclear ambitions'. He conceded that 'diplomacy has failed', called for crippling economic sanctions on Iran, and added that 'we should never take the military option off the table'.⁵ George Washington University professor Amitai Etzioni, a former senior advisor to President Jimmy Carter, called in the May/June 2010 issue of *Military Review* for a bombing campaign against military and infrastructure targets that 'would compel the [Iranian] regime to change its behavior, by ever-higher levels of "pain"' (Etzioni 2010, 124). And the 'relentlessly centrist' (Hertzberg 2006) *Washington Post* columnist David Broder wrote in late 2010 that, just as the Great Depression was resolved by World War II, so should President Obama tackle the current economic crisis by 'spend[ing] much of 2011 and 2012 orchestrating a showdown with the mullahs. This will help him politically because the opposition party will be urging him on. And as tensions rise and we accelerate preparations for war, the economy will improve' (Broder 2010).

⁴The transcript of Haass's remarks on CNN is posted at <<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1002/14/fzgps.01.html>>, accessed 12 April 2010.

⁵<www.aipac.org/PC2010/videos.asp>, accessed 12 April 2010.

Notwithstanding this loud, persistent Bomb Iran drumbeat, however, and notwithstanding repeated declarations by top US officials that the military option is still on the table, the fact remains that the US has *not* launched an overt attack on Iran.⁶ This article seeks to explain why this has been the case. Why has the US refrained from attacking Iran's nuclear facilities even though US leaders have persistently depicted an Iranian bomb as 'unacceptable' and even though key lawmakers and opinion leaders in Washington have continually been beating the war drums?

*

Neither American public opinion nor the personal policy preferences of Presidents Bush and Obama provide an adequate answer to this question. The personal preferences of American presidents are hard to figure out. We have no direct access to the president's private thoughts and, as for his public statements, we cannot know with any certainty whether such statements reflect strongly held personal beliefs or the beliefs of political and bureaucratic groups that the president wishes to appeal to. For example, when candidate Barack Obama assured AIPAC in 2008 that 'I will do everything in my power to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon—everything in my power to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapons—everything' (quoted in Sheridan 2010), it was virtually impossible to tell whether the emphatic repetition of these words signalled an inner conviction or a desire to curry favour with an influential pressure group. By the same token, when President Bush warned in 2007 that a nuclear-armed Iran might spur a 'World War III', did he really believe his own apocalyptic words (Haaretz 2007)? It seems that most American commentators and experts thought he did, and they inferred from Bush's heated rhetoric an expectation that he would order an attack on Iran's nuclear sites—16 of the 18 participants in a high-powered dinner party held in Washington in early 2007 agreed with the prediction that President Bush would bomb Iran before leaving office (Clemons 2007a).⁷ But, as we know with the benefit of hindsight, the Bush administration's actual behaviour confounded these widespread expectations. Furthermore, even if we were to accept the notion that the intensity of the president's policy preferences can be inferred from his rhetoric, and even if we accept the notion that Obama's less apocalyptic rhetoric might indicate a less bellicose attitude towards Iran than that of President Bush, the underlying fact remains that the abstention of the US from attacking Iran persisted notwithstanding the change in administration and notwithstanding the alleged variation in the intensity of the president's personal proclivity to use force.⁸ To paraphrase a key inferential principle, a constant cannot be explained by a variable.

⁶ I employ the term 'overtly' because Hersh (2008) reported that US Special Operations Forces have conducted covert operations inside Iran (see also Sanger 2009).

⁷ Clemons (2007a) added that, 'In the national debate about America's next moves in the Middle East, an irrepressible and perhaps irresponsible certainty that America will attack Iran now dominates commentary across the political spectrum.'

⁸ Likewise, the Obama administration's current diplomatic efforts are continuous with the strategy, announced by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2006, of 'join[ing] forces with Europe, Russia and China to press Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment activities' (Cooper and Sanger 2007).

Nor can the constancy of the American no-attack posture towards Iran be effectively explained as a reflection of American public opinion. In fact, the results of numerous public opinion polls conducted since 2006 suggest that the American public is hardly averse to preventive military action against Iran.⁹ Poll results are notoriously sensitive to the wording and framing of the questions but, allowing for this sensitivity, the aggregate picture emerging from the surveys at minimum does not indicate deep-seated opposition to preventive strikes against Iran. For example, a Zogby International poll of likely voters in October 2007 found that 52 per cent of the respondents would support a US military strike to prevent Iran from building a nuclear weapon;¹⁰ and a survey conducted two years later by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press indicated that 'There is broad willingness across the political spectrum to use military force to prevent Iran from going nuclear'.¹¹ Strikingly, although Iran's nuclear installations remain under the surveillance of the International Energy Atomic Agency and although the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) concluded that Iran had stopped its nuclear weapons programme, 71 per cent of the respondents in a February 2010 CNN poll gave an affirmative answer to the question, 'Do you think Iran currently has nuclear weapons, or not?' In sum, survey data indicate that the alarmist tenor of official US portrayals of the Iranian menace has permeated popular attitudes and that the American public would most likely have approved of a preventive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities. Public opinion cannot be said to have restrained the US from launching such a strike.

To explain why the US has so far eschewed an overt attack on the Islamic Republic, we must look not at the politics of the American public at large but at the politics of Washington's organized pressure groups and the federal bureaucracy. In the remainder of this article I offer an analysis of the main political and bureaucratic forces in Washington acting to promote or impede a preventive attack on Iran's nuclear sites. My analysis is informed by Graham Allison's (1969) famous 'bureaucratic politics' conceptual model. I argue that America's abstention from attacking Iran should be understood not as a coherent national response to Iran's nuclear programme but rather as an 'intra-national political outcome' resulting from the 'pulling' of 'Iran Threat' interests—primarily Vice President Cheney's camp in the Bush White House, members of Congress, and AIPAC—and the countervailing 'hauling' of the Pentagon, the military's top brass, the intelligence community and the Department of State (Allison 1969, 707–708). The main reason why neither the Bush nor the Obama administration carried out its veiled threats to use force against Iran was that the 'haulers', who were led by a formidable bureaucratic-political player, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, have had the upper hand over the hawkish 'pullers'. Indeed, the most important fact accounting for the no-attack stance of the US towards Iran is that the people who would have been in charge of military action—the secretary of defense and the top officers of the uniformed military—have steadfastly opposed such action.

⁹ For a comprehensive compilation of polling results on US policy toward Iran see <www.pollingreport.com/iran.htm>, accessed 14 April 2010.

¹⁰ <www.zogby.com/news/readnews.cfm?ID=1379#Anchor-51638>, accessed 18 April 2010.

¹¹ <<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1366/public-support-military-action-against-iran-nuclear-weapons>>, accessed 18 April 2010.

Washington forces 'pulling' for attacking Iran

During the second term of President George W Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney was the chief advocate within the administration for a hard line towards Iran. In May 2007 members of Cheney's staff told conservative research groups and consulting firms in Washington that the Vice President had little faith in diplomacy and that he was trying to persuade the President to confront Iran militarily (Cooper 2007a; Cooper and Sanger 2007). A year later, at an off-the-record gathering of foreign policy experts, Cheney 'left little doubt that he would favor using force to put an end to Iran's nuclear ambitions' (Stolberg 2008). After leaving office Cheney publicly confirmed that he 'was probably a bigger advocate of military action than any of [his] colleagues' (Phillips 2009).

But Cheney's influence on policy, which was unparalleled during President Bush's first term in office, had waned considerably. In his second term Bush came to rely more heavily on the advice of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, whose advocacy of a diplomatic response to the Iranian threat was anathema to Cheney (Harwood 2009). Contrary to Cheney's views, 'Bush halted the waterboarding of accused terrorists, closed secret CIA prisons, sought congressional blessing for domestic surveillance, and reached out diplomatically to Iran and North Korea' (Gellman 2009). Furthermore, the Vice President was displeased by the dismissal in 2006 of his close friend Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. And Cheney's 'desperate end-of-term efforts' to secure a pardon for his former chief of staff, I Lewis 'Scooter' Libby, were rebuffed by the President (Gellman 2009).

Partly because of Cheney's diminished clout and partly because Congress is more accessible than the executive branch to interest groups such as AIPAC, the legislative branch became the main platform within the US government for promoting a hard line on Iran. In the past few years Congress has repeatedly outflanked the president on the Iranian issue. Large bipartisan majorities have supported, often to the dismay of the administration, a series of bills imposing unilateral sanctions against Iran. In 2005, for example, a sanctions' bill introduced by Senator Rick Santorum (Republican, Pennsylvania) and Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (Republican, Florida) garnered 61 co-sponsors in the Senate (including 23 Democrats) and passed the House with overwhelming bipartisan support (Mikhail 2006). Similarly, the 'Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act' (IRPSA) introduced by Representative Howard Berman (Democrat, California) was passed by a huge majority in the House in December 2009 and a similar bill was unanimously passed by the Senate in January 2010 (Rozen 2009; 2010a; Stephens 2010). The point here is not that Congress always gets its way—Senator Santorum's bill was buried by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard Lugar, who acted in concert with the Bush administration (Mikhail 2006). The point is rather that Congress has consistently been a catalyst for hard-line policies towards Iran and that Congress has typically played, as Laura Rozen (2010a) put it, 'bad cop' to the president's 'good cop' on the Iranian sanctions issue. The massive, bipartisan Congressional support for a tough stance towards Tehran suggests (if not proves) that, had the Bush or Obama administration launched a campaign to sell an attack on Iran to the American people, Congress would not have stood in the way.¹²

¹² As columnist Glenn Greenwald (2007) noted, Congress has been so reflexively hawkish that, 'not only would Congress never actively stop a military strike against Iran if the administration wanted that, it is highly likely that they would affirmatively vote to authorize it'.

Now, many lawmakers who support a confrontational approach towards Iran surely do so out of inner conviction but, as David Cloud commented in *Politico*, 'this approach has the added benefit of being strongly supported by pro-Israel groups, including the American Israel Political Affairs Committee' (Cloud 2009). The 100,000-member strong AIPAC is widely acknowledged as one of the most powerful lobbying organization on Capitol Hill.¹³ Its annual policy conferences draw thousands of delegates, who 'fan out on Capitol Hill for more than 500 separate meetings with lawmakers and key aides' (Glass 2009). The lists of speakers at these conferences routinely feature presidential candidates, vice presidents, cabinet secretaries and Congressional leaders; half the Senate and more than half the House attended the gala dinner at the 2007 AIPAC conference (Kampeas 2007)

AIPAC has for a long time considered a nuclear-armed Iran 'a primary fear' (Mikhail 2006; Kampeas 2009) and in recent years this issue has become the organization's most critical priority. 'For AIPAC', a Senate aide told commentator MJ Rosenberg in summer 2009, 'it's all Iran, all the time. I don't think they have come in about any other issue for a year or two' (Rosenberg 2009; see also Scherer 2010).¹⁴

It is important to note that AIPAC is virtually the only pressure group that persistently lobbies Congress for a tough stance towards Iran. The Iranian-American community, sizeable though it may be, is notoriously fractious and, although substantial elements within the community are irreconcilably hostile to the Islamic regime in Tehran, they do not have a unified, effective voice in Washington (Bruck 2006; Smith 2010).¹⁵ Thus, AIPAC president David Victor was scarcely exaggerating when he told the delegates to the group's 2009 policy conference that 'we are the only constituency in America making this [anti-Iranian] case' (Glass 2009). While AIPAC is clearly aided by the fact that most Americans are alarmed by Iran's nuclear programme, the Iranian threat is hardly the public's uppermost policy concern and it is unlikely that, absent AIPAC's energetic efforts, Congress would have placed Iran as high on its agenda as it has. Indeed, it is hardly an accident that, as one observer put it, two 'Washington springtime perennials' have coincided with each other in recent years: 'An Iran sanctions bill is about to roll off the Congressional presses, and thousands of AIPAC lobbyists are about to tumble out of buses to make sure it passes' (Kampeas 2009).

Although AIPAC has focused its lobbying activities on tough sanctions (Glass 2009; Kampeas 2009), and although it has not openly called for military action against Iran (Leverett and Leverett 2010), AIPAC has nonetheless functioned as a key enabler of

¹³ AIPAC boasts that 'A March 2005 National Journal survey of Members of Congress found AIPAC to be considered by lawmakers as the second most effective lobbying organization on Capitol Hill.' See AIPAC press release dated 11 March 2007, titled 'America's pro-Israel lobby holds its annual policy conference in Washington, D.C.' at <www.aipac.org/Publications/PressAIPACMediaUpdates/PC_07_Media_Kit.pdf>, accessed 5 June 2010.

¹⁴ My claim that AIPAC wields considerable influence on the Iran issue is not tantamount to endorsing John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's (2006) argument that 'the thrust of US policy in the [Middle East] region derives almost entirely from domestic politics, and especially the activities of the "Israel Lobby"'. In fact, I argue that US policy toward Iran has been shaped by the aversion of the defence bureaucracy to military action as much as by AIPAC's hawkish activities.

¹⁵ I thank Majid Sharifi for sharing with me his insights into the politics of the Iranian-American community.

such action. The most direct way in which AIPAC performed this enabling function was by successfully removing from an Iraq War supplemental funding bill a provision that would have required the president to get Congressional approval for war against Iran. The provision was supported by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and many Democratic lawmakers who sought to 'reassert Congress's constitutional role in declaring war', but 'AIPAC and some Democrats close to Israel feared the clause would restrain Bush as he pushes Iran to come clean about its nuclear program' (Kampeas 2007). AIPAC's hand was strengthened by the fact that negotiations over the supplemental package happened to coincide with the group's 2007 policy conference; Pelosi relented and agreed to remove the clause (Stoddard 2007; McArthur 2007).

AIPAC has served as an enabler of the military option in two other ways. First, AIPAC helps keep this option on the table by continuously depicting a nuclear Iran as an 'urgent threat',¹⁶ repeatedly insisting that 'Time is running out to stop the Iranian regime before it achieves full nuclear capacity',¹⁷ and maintaining that the horizon of diplomatic and legislative action must not be open ended. This sense of urgency in turn reverberates throughout Congressional speeches, letters to the president and legislative amendments, whose drafters often rely on AIPAC's talking points (in fact, these Congressional documents are sometimes drafted by AIPAC staffers—Lobe 2007; Kamen 2009; Traub 2009). As two critics of AIPAC observed, AIPAC's material does not explicitly call for attacking Iran's nuclear targets, but 'subtly and ominously, the group notes that "tough sanctions that are strictly enforced still remain the best option *at this time* to persuade Iran's leaders to alter their course"' (Leverett and Leverett 2010, emphasis added).

Second, AIPAC plays a key role in keeping the military option on the table by providing a prominent public platform on which elected officials and presidential aspirants all but compete with each other in making bellicose anti-Iranian statements. It was no coincidence, for example, that Barack Obama delivered his arguably most hawkish speech to date on the Middle East at the AIPAC policy conference in June 2008. As the *Wall Street Journal* pointed out, candidate Obama 'used the AIPAC speech to tweak one of his most controversial positions—a stated willingness to meet with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—and outline a hard-line position on Iran that is basically interchangeable with Sen. McCain's' (Davis 2008; McCain, too, gave a bellicose speech at the conference). As noted earlier, Obama repeated the word 'everything' three times to allude to the measures he would take 'to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon'. And 'let there be no doubt,' he added, 'I will always keep the threat of military action on the table to defend our security and our ally, Israel. Do not be confused.'¹⁸ Now, one may

¹⁶Emphasis added. The first of three 'Key points on the Iranian nuclear program' posted prominently on AIPAC's website is titled 'A nuclear Iran: an urgent threat'. It goes on to state that 'We are at a critical juncture in efforts to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapons capability. Many experts believe Iran could have such a capability by the end of [2010].' <http://www.aipac.org/index_23021.asp>, accessed 6 June 2010.

¹⁷See AIPAC press release dated 13 April 2007, titled 'Memo: tougher sanctions needed to pressure Iran', <www.aipac.org/Publications/AIPACAnalysesMemos/AIPAC_Memo_-Tougher_Sanctions_Needed_to_Pressure_Iran.pdf>, accessed 6 June 2010. The phrase 'time is running out' also appears in AIPAC press releases dated 23 November 2005, 29 December 2006 and 30 August 2007.

¹⁸The transcript of the speech is posted at <www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91150432>, accessed 8 June 2010.

reasonably claim that this emphatic rhetoric was indicative of the exigencies of the presidential campaign more than of Obama's core beliefs, but this claim only reinforces my argument that US policy towards Iran is shaped significantly by domestic politics. For, as Obama himself declared during his campaign, 'don't tell me words don't matter' (quoted in Rove 2008). Whether or not Obama truly intended to do 'everything in my power ... everything' to prevent Iran from acquiring a bomb, once he uttered these words they became putative weapons that his political opponents, or even his friends, could use to prod him to do harsher 'things' to Iran than he might have done otherwise. Indeed, advocates of a hard line towards Iran have repeatedly reminded Obama of these tough words. In April 2010 more than 300 members of Congress signed an AIPAC-endorsed letter, drafted by Representatives Jesse Jackson, Jr (Democrat, Illinois) and Mike Pence (Republican, Indiana), urging the President to 'fulfill your June 2008 pledge that you would do everything in my power to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon' (Johnson 2010a; 2010b). Such reminders make it politically costly, if not impossible, for the President to take the military option off the table.

The dais of the Washington Convention Center—the venue of AIPAC's annual conferences—remains the site from which elected officials issue some of their most bellicose statements on Iran. At the spring 2010 conference 'Some of AIPAC's congressional guests leaned further forward than the group's own materials did about the possibility of military strikes against Iran's nuclear infrastructure' (Leverett and Leverett 2010). Senator Schumer characterized as a 'failure' the administration's diplomatic efforts to tighten multilateral sanctions, called for the immediate implementation of unilateral US sanctions against Iran and stated (as noted earlier) that 'we should never take the military option off the table'.¹⁹ Fellow Democratic Senator Evan Bayh of Indiana went further, stating that even aggressive sanctions are 'unlikely to work' and that 'Now we have to turn to contemplate the final option—the use of force to prevent [Iran] from getting a nuclear weapon'. He added that 'In the long run you have to do what you have to do' (Johnson 2010c). Not to be outdone by Democrats, Republican Senator Lindsay Graham of South Carolina underscored that 'all options must be on the table' and 'you know exactly what I'm talking about'. He went on to say that military strikes should not be restricted to Iran's nuclear facilities:

If military force is ever employed, it should be done in a decisive fashion. The Iran government's ability to wage conventional war against its neighbors and our troops in the region should not exist. They should not have one plane that can fly or one ship that can float. (Quoted in Leverett and Leverett 2010)

In sum, although harsh sanctions remain AIPAC's preferred policy 'at this time', high-profile speakers at its conferences repeatedly warn that, as Senator Graham put it, 'time is not on our side'. They have not shied away from declaring that a military confrontation with Iran may be necessary before too long.

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Before turning to the bureaucratic forces 'hauling' against attacking Iran, it is worth noting that AIPAC's effectiveness in 'pulling' Congress towards a hard line

¹⁹ <www.aipac.org/PC2010/videos.asp>, accessed 12 April 2010.

on Tehran reflected not only the organization's active pressure but also the relative weakness of political counter-pressures. The two major Washington groups that publicly sought to counteract AIPAC's influence on Capitol Hill—J Street and the National Iranian American Congress (NIAC)—proved no match for AIPAC's prowess.

J Street was created in early 2008 as a self-described 'pro-Israel, pro-peace' lobby and it is widely 'seen as the liberal counterpart to AIPAC' (Traub 2009; Bogardus 2009). The group is 'strongly opposed to the use of preemptive military force by Israel or the United States to attack Iran',²⁰ and it initially opposed the tough sanctions advocated by AIPAC (Bogardus 2009).

During the Bush administration J Street could not have exercised significant influence on US Iran policy because the organization was still in its infancy when President Bush stepped down—its first national conference took place nine months into the Obama presidency.²¹ Since then, the group has experienced 'dramatic growth' and it has gained a high media profile but, as a recent in-depth report concluded, J Street's growth 'has not yet translated into Capitol Hill clout or dollars-based power in the partisan wars. And it hasn't put a dent in AIPAC's political muscle or bank accounts' (Besser 2011). Whereas the 10,000 activists who attended AIPAC's 2011 conference were addressed by President Obama, the keynote speaker at the J Street 2011 conference was Obama's Middle East advisor Dennis Ross (Cohn 2011). More important, even strong critics of AIPAC admit that 'virtually all of the money on the Israel issue is still on AIPAC's side' (Besser 2011).

Additionally, the effectiveness of J Street has been undermined by its 'ongoing struggle to gain acceptance both in Washington and within the broader Jewish community ... the group is still spending time and energy defending itself from critics who say that it isn't sufficiently pro-Israel'. The 'setbacks' J Street suffered in this battle and in its efforts to cultivate relations with the Israeli embassy in Washington (Guttman 2011a) may have been responsible for the fact that the group ultimately backpedalled on its opposition to Iran sanctions—in December 2009 J Street threw its support behind IRPSA, the harsh sanctions bill that AIPAC 'lobbied tirelessly for' (Guttman 2009; Bogardus 2009). In sum, J Street was practically non-existent during the Bush administration; the group came into its own during the Obama administration but it remained outgunned by AIPAC and made no appreciable dent in Congress's hawkish posture towards Iran.

Once J Street endorsed IRPSA, NIAC remained the only noteworthy pressure group holding out against the sanctions package (Bogardus 2009). NIAC was founded in 2002 by Trita Parsi, who came to the Washington in 2001 from Sweden, where his family found refuge in 1978 after escaping Iran. Parsi observed that 'Iranian Americans were wealthy and successful, but they lacked a powerful organization that they could use to display their communal clout and aid their homeland. They needed something like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the powerful Washington lobby of another American immigrant community' (Smith 2010). Yet, even though Parsi quickly gained a high profile in the media, he fell far short of realizing his ambition of forming a powerful, unified

²⁰ <<http://jstreet.org/policy/issues/iran/>>, accessed 15 July 2011.

²¹ <<http://jstreet.org/j-street-conference-2009-driving-change-securing-peace/>>, accessed 15 July 2011.

Iranian-American front in Washington. NIAC's membership is very small compared with AIPAC or with the size of the Iranian-American community. More important, this community remains, as noted earlier, deeply divided—many Iranian-Americans are adamantly hostile to NIAC's agenda of promoting 'dialogue and engagement'²² between the US and the Islamic Republic (Smith 2010). Thus, it should not be surprising that NIAC's opposition to the AIPAC-backed IRPSA has utterly failed to sway lawmakers—the House of Representatives passed the bill by a vote of 412 ayes to 12 nays (Guttman 2009).

Washington forces 'hauling' against attacking Iran

If pressure for a military confrontation with Iran was channelled primarily through the hallways of Congress, effective countervailing pressures emanated mainly from the ranks of the federal bureaucracy, including the Department of State, the intelligence community and, most importantly, the defence establishment.

The Department of State

That the members of the US Foreign Service would prefer diplomatic options to military ones should be hardly surprising. The office of the undersecretary of state for political affairs—the third-ranking position in the State Department and typically the top office held by a career diplomat—played a key role in promoting a diplomatic approach to the Iranian nuclear threat. R Nicholas Burns, who was appointed to this position in 2005, when the idea of military strikes against Iran began gaining momentum inside the Bush administration (Hersh 2006), was described as 'the most ardent proponent of a diplomatic resolution to the problem of Iran's nuclear ambitions' (Rosen 2007). Burns firmly believed, as he told the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee in March 2007, 'that diplomacy is our best course of action in blocking and containing the Iranian regime; that a military confrontation with Iran is not desirable, nor is it inevitable if we continue our skilled diplomatic course and have the patience to see it play out over the mid- to long-term'.²³ Burns helped engineer a meeting between US and Iranian diplomats in Baghdad in May 2007. He also skilfully led the negotiations, begun in 2006, with the four other permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany, to impose economic sanctions on Iran to force it to suspend its uranium enrichment activities (Cooper and Sanger 2007; Cooper 2008). By successfully persuading Russia and China to join the US and its Western European allies in pressing sanctions against Iran, albeit watered-down ones, Burns significantly weakened the hand of the Iran hawks within the Bush administration (Clemons 2008). There is at least a kernel of truth in Steve Clemons' (2008) depiction of Burns as 'one of the few who may have saved this country from another self-destructive war [against Iran] in the Middle East'.

William J Burns, who replaced R Nicholas Burns in April 2008, shared with his predecessor not only a last name (the two men are not related) but also the fact that

²² <www.tritaparsi.com/biography.htm>, accessed 20 July 2011.

²³ 'Carrots and sticks: remarks from Undersecretary of State R. Nicholas Burns at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library', *Boston Review*, May–June 2007, <<http://bostonreview.net/BR32.3/burns.php>>, accessed 21 June 2010.

he was intensely 'disliked' by UN Ambassador John Bolton and other Iran hawks allied with Vice President Cheney (Clemons 2008). William Burns' testimony on Iran before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on 9 July 2008 was remarkably less alarmist than the heated Iran Threat rhetoric that emanated from Cheney's circle and from members of Congress. Burns opened his testimony with a lengthy discussion of 'Iran's vulnerabilities', reassuring the Committee that 'Iran is not ten feet tall', that 'Iran's regime has some real insecurities' and that 'Iran has no real friends'. Only then did Burns turn to the challenges posed by Iran and, much like his predecessor, he expressed a clear preference for a diplomatic 'dual-track strategy' of engagement and sanctions to persuade Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons ambitions.²⁴ Burns subsequently worked assiduously to implement this strategy. His presence at a July 2008 meeting in Geneva with Iran's nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, led by the European Union's foreign policy chief Javier Solana, marked a significant softening of the Bush administration's longstanding position that it would meet with Iranian diplomats only after Iran suspended its uranium enrichment—the *New York Times* remarked that the Undersecretary's presence at the meeting 'may help quiet the mounting calls in both the United States and Israel for military strikes against Iran' (Sciolino and Myers 2008). In October 2009 Burns actively participated at another Geneva meeting led by Solana in which Iran agreed in principle to send most of its lightly enriched uranium to Russia and France to be turned into nuclear fuel for civilian use (Landler and Erlanger 2009; Erlanger and Landler 2009). Once the Iranians reneged on the deal a short time later, Burns became 'a central player' in the efforts to coax Russia and China to agree to harsher sanctions against Iran, efforts that culminated in the adoption by the UN Security Council of a fourth round of sanctions in June 2010 (Landler 2010; MacFarquhar 2010).

The ultimate power in the Department of State, however, rests not with the career diplomats so much as with the senior officials appointed by the president, especially the secretary of state. Historically, these appointed officials have not always shared the dovish inclination of the professional diplomats. For example, during the Reagan administration, Secretary of State George Schultz sharply attacked the doctrine enunciated by Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, which outlined highly restrictive conditions for US military interventions overseas (LaFeber 1994, 708–710). And Madeleine Albright, first as ambassador to the UN and then as secretary of state, was arguably the strongest advocate within the Clinton administration for using force in the Balkans (Halberstam 2001).

When Condoleezza Rice became secretary of state in January 2005 one might have expected her, too, to advocate a muscular posture—after all, as national security advisor during the first term of the Bush administration she unequivocally supported the decision to invade Iraq and she warned in August 2004 that the President would 'look at all the tools that are available to him' to stop Iran's nuclear programme (Sanger 2004). But, as it turned out, at Foggy Bottom, Rice developed a very close working relationship with R Nicholas Burns and, partly perhaps under his influence (Wright 2008), 'Rice has increasingly come to reflect the more diplomatic view advocated by the State Department, which has

²⁴The text of the testimony is posted at <<http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/bur070908.pdf>>, accessed 23 June 2010.

pushed for a more restrained tone in America's dealings with the world in general, and Iran in particular' (Cooper 2007b). With the support of Burns and of her deputy, John Negroponte, Rice appears to have won a bitter struggle inside the White House against the faction led by Vice President Cheney, who was sceptical of diplomacy and advocated greater consideration of a military strike against Iran. To the chagrin of Cheney and his allies, Rice was 'the one who prodded Mr. Bush [in 2006] to offer to reverse 27 years of American policy and join European talks with Iran over its nuclear programme, provided that Iran suspended its enrichment of uranium' (Cooper 2007a). Indeed, the fact that President Bush hewed to the diplomatic course through his last day in office and refused to authorize a military strike on Iran can in part be credited to Rice's influence.

As a candidate for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party, Hillary Clinton criticized her rival, Barack Obama, for being too keen to 'engage' Iran. As President Obama's Secretary of State Clinton reportedly remained privately 'skeptical of the value of engaging with Tehran' (Landler 2010). Once the deal worked out with the Iranians in Geneva in October 2009 collapsed, Clinton's preference for the alternative diplomatic track—tightening up economic sanctions against Iran—became 'more in sync' with actual US policy (Landler 2010). It is important to note, however, that, notwithstanding her reported pessimism about the prospects of engaging Iran and the relish with which she spearheaded the effort to drum up international support for a new package of UN sanctions against Iran (Landler 2010), there are no indications whatsoever that Secretary Clinton advocated a military strike against Iran within the Obama administration. Clinton might not oppose the use of force if other principals within the administration were to argue for it vigorously, but she is not likely to actively promote the military option.

The intelligence community

In her bureaucratic battle against Vice President Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice received crucial support from the leadership of the US intelligence community, including Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Michael McConnell and CIA Director Michael Hayden (Beaumont 2007; Clemons 2007b). The intelligence establishment strengthened Rice's hand immensely by performing a 'most assertive, surprising and rebellious act' (Klein 2007): publicizing the conclusions of an NIE of Iran's nuclear programme.

The NIE—a 150-page classified document representing the collective assessment of America's 16 intelligence agencies—was requested in summer 2006 by Senate majority leader Harry Reid (Democrat, Nevada), and its preparation by the National Intelligence Council took more than a year (Bender and Stockman 2007). On 3 December 2007 the office of the DNI, which oversees the National Intelligence Council, released a declassified summary of the NIE's key judgments. The summary opened with the statement that 'We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program', adding that 'We assess with moderate confidence that Tehran had not restarted its nuclear weapons program as of mid-2007.'²⁵ These statements flatly contradicted an

²⁵ See <www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf>, accessed 18 April 2010.

earlier NIE, which assessed with high confidence in summer 2005 that Iran 'is currently determined to develop nuclear weapons' (Goodman and Bowen 2008).

It must be noted that the US intelligence community regularly produces NIEs on a wide range of issues and that most of these documents do not reach the public domain (Bruno and Otterman 2008). Thus, the declassification of the summary of the Iran NIE was hardly a foregone conclusion—its prompt release reflected not a standard bureaucratic procedure so much as a premeditated decision of the top echelon of the intelligence establishment. As then deputy DNI Donald Kerr told the *Boston Globe*, 'the decision to declassify portions of the report was [aimed] to ensure "an accurate presentation" of the situation, and to help inform public debate on how to best deal with Iran' (Bender and Stockman 2007). Though Kerr could not have said so publicly, it is exceedingly unlikely that he and his colleagues did not understand that the 'accurate presentation' they injected into the public debate served not an educational purpose so much as a political one, that is, the purpose of undermining the case for bombing Iran.

Indeed, the NIE's key conclusion was immediately reported to have 'stunned' the White House (Klein 2007; see also Sanger 2009) and to have 'undercut much of the foundation' from the Bush administration's 'aggressive foreign policy' towards Iran (Myers 2007). While some commentators lamented the fact that the document would undermine American diplomatic efforts to strengthen sanctions against Iran (Rozen 2007), the 'first casualty' of the NIE was clearly the military option (Shuster 2007). The release of the NIE's conclusions dealt a serious blow to the hawkish White House faction led by Vice President Cheney (Klein 2007), for it removed, as Senator Chuck Hegel (Republican, Nebraska) put it, 'if nothing else, the urgency that we have to attack Iran, or knock out facilities' (Myers 2007). The NIE might not have rendered the use of force 'impossible', as 'many experts' opined, but, inasmuch as its public dissemination raised the political cost of military action, the NIE undoubtedly made such an attack less likely (Shuster 2007).

In February 2011 DNI James Clapper submitted to Congress an updated version of the NIE on Iran's nuclear programme (Entous 2011; Hersh 2011). Because the report, unlike its predecessor, was not released in declassified summary form, our current knowledge of its conclusions comes largely from anonymous sources. According to unnamed US officials who spoke to the *Wall Street Journal* shortly after the submission of the document, 'at least some of those 2007 assertions have been revised in the new NIE. But the new assessment stops short of rejecting the earlier findings' (Entous 2011). A few months later investigative reporter Seymour Hersh (2011) wrote that 'a government consultant who has read the highly classified 2011 NIE update depicted the report as reinforcing the essential conclusion of the 2007 paper: Iran halted weaponization in 2003'; Hersh concluded that 'nothing significantly new had been learned to suggest that Iran is pursuing a nuclear weapon'. It appears that, although the 2011 update may have revised some judgments contained in the earlier NIE, the relationship between the 2011 and 2007 documents was not even remotely as contradictory as that between the 2007 NIE and its predecessor. In any rate, regardless of the substance of the 2011 update, the fact remains that during the three years in which the 2007 NIE was in effect its publicly released conclusions operated as powerful, if not fail-safe, brakes on the momentum towards bombing Iran.

The defence establishment

In 2006–2007, when the Bomb Iran voices in Washington were coalescing into a chorus, the US armed forces were being stretched thin by two enduring wars. In an interview he gave the *New York Times* in October 2007, shortly after his appointment as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Admiral Michael Mullen characterized the state of US ground forces as ‘breakable’ and he ‘expressed deep concerns that the long counterinsurgency missions in Iraq and Afghanistan have so consumed the military that the Army and Marine Corps may be unprepared for a high-intensity war against a major adversary’ (Shanker 2007). Largely because of this state of affairs, the top brass of the military began pushing back against an attack on Iran.

At a meeting held at the Pentagon’s secure facility in late 2006, members of the JCS told President Bush that they opposed a military strike against Iran. They warned that, in response to such a strike, the Iranians ‘could make life very difficult for US troops on the ground in Iraq. They could shut off the flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz, thereby creating a global economic crisis. And they could use the threat of Iran-sponsored terrorist attacks on the American homeland’ (Klein 2007). During the following year the military chiefs continued, as inside sources told Seymour Hersh of the *New Yorker*, “‘pushing back very hard” against White House pressure to undertake a military strike against Iran . . . “at least ten senior flag and general officers, including combatant commanders”—the four-star officers who direct military operations around the world—“have weighed in on that issue”” (Hersh 2008). In September 2007, when *Washington Post* defence correspondent Dana Priest was asked by a reader whether the Bush administration was going to attack Iran, she replied, ‘Frankly, I think the military would revolt and there would be no pilots to fly those missions. This is a little bit of hyperbole, but not much’ (Priest 2007).

Much like the leaders of the intelligence community, who released the NIE’s key judgments to the public, some top officers did not keep their professional views within the confines of secure conference rooms. The most outspoken officer was probably the head of US Central Command, Admiral William Fallon, who would have been the operational commander of a war on Iran. In a series of press interviews Fallon questioned the wisdom of such a war (Hersh 2008). For example, during a visit to the Persian Gulf in September 2007 he told Al-Jazeera television that the ‘constant drum beat of conflict’ was ‘not helpful and not useful’. He added that he ‘expect[ed] that there will be no war and that is what we ought to be working for . . . We ought to try and to do our utmost to create different conditions’ (Murphy 2007).

Fallon resigned his post under pressure in March 2008, partly because some members of the White House staff were displeased with his public statements (Hersh 2008), but this episode did not deter his top superior from speaking out on Iran in similar terms.²⁶ From his first month in office JCS Chairman Mullen has repeatedly voiced serious reservations about using force against Iran. In the above-noted interview with *The Times* he said that diplomatic and economic

²⁶ According to Hersh (2008), Fallon’s departure was also precipitated by a his insistence on greater control of special operations within his area of responsibility. Fallon felt that some information about special operations was being withheld from him.

pressure must take precedence over military strikes. With the US being engaged in two conflicts in that part of the world, he cautioned, attacking Iran entails 'extraordinary challenges and risks' (Shanker 2007). At a Pentagon briefing in July 2008 Mullen reiterated his preference for diplomatic pressure on Iran, stating that fighting Iran would impose 'extreme stress' upon the already-stretched US military (Knowlton 2008). In February 2010 he declared that,

as I've said many times, I worry a lot about the unintended consequences of any sort of military action [against Iran]. For now, the diplomatic and the economic levers of international power are and ought to be the levers first pulled. Indeed, I would hope they are always and consistently pulled. No strike, however effective, will be, in and of itself, decisive. (Quoted in Dreyfuss 2010)

And in April 2010 Mullen similarly told a forum at Columbia University that 'the diplomatic, the engagement piece, the sanctions piece, all those things ... need to be addressed to possibly have Iran change its mind' (Rozen 2010b).

By speaking out persistently in favour of nonmilitary approaches to the Iranian nuclear challenge Admiral Mullen gave valuable ammunition to political groups and commentators opposed to the military option, effectively raising the domestic political cost of a presidential decision to attack Iran.²⁷ In principle, of course, the President could have fired Mullen, but, as I suggested earlier, the President would have been hard pressed to identify other candidates for the job who did not share Mullen's reservations. Additionally, the Admiral enjoyed the full backing of his immediate superior, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. In fact, Mullen made some of his most emphatic public statements against attacking Iran in the presence of Secretary Gates (Dreyfuss 2010).

Having endured a rocky relationship with President Bush's first secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld, the top brass of the military were quite happy with the naming of Robert Gates as Rumsfeld's successor in late 2006. In part, their enthusiasm about Gates reflected the fact that his methodical managerial style was 'diametrically opposed to Rumsfeld's', but this sentiment was also kindled by the senior officers' knowledge that Gates shared their concern about the 'breakable' state of the military and their serious qualms about attacking Iran (Ephron et al 2007).

In his Senate confirmation hearing Gates was asked by Senator Robert Byrd (Democrat, West Virginia) whether he favoured attacking Iran. As veteran defence correspondent Fred Kaplan observed, most witnesses in Gates' position would have ducked this question but Gates addressed it rather candidly. 'We have seen in Iraq', he replied, 'that once war is unleashed, it becomes unpredictable.' He warned that the Iranians could disrupt oil exports from the Persian Gulf, increase their aid to the Iraqi insurgency and step up terrorist attacks worldwide (Kaplan 2006). Gates went on—as Sanger (2009) concluded from a series of interviews with government officials and outside experts—to play the lead role inside the Bush administration in dissuading the President from launching an overt attack on Iran. After President Obama decided to retain him as secretary of defense, Gates declared (through his spokesman) that 'a potential strike on the Iranian facilities is

²⁷ For example, in an editorial dated 20 April 2010, the editors of the *New York Times* opined that 'we are sure that an attack would be a disaster. We urge anyone who has doubts to listen closely to Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.'

not something that we or anyone else should be pursuing at this time'. All indications are that Gates clung to this position throughout his tenure in the Obama cabinet; for example, when Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu stated in November 2010 that the US must convince Iran that it is prepared to use military force if it wants to stop the Iranian nuclear programme, Gates immediately expressed 'disagree[ment] that only a credible military threat can get Iran to take the actions that it needs to end its nuclear weapons program' (*Washington Post* 2010). As proponents of a tougher stance towards Iran complained, by making such public statements Secretary Gates kept 'undercutting' President Obama's message that 'all options remain on the table' (*Washington Post* 2010).

It was not merely by making public statements that Gates became, as *Newsweek* aptly put it, 'the best insurance' that America's warmaking machinery would not be used against Iran (Ephron et al 2007). Gates became such an effective leader of the bureaucratic-political pushback against bombing Iran by virtue of three assets. His first asset was the seat he occupied—his opposition to overt military action mattered far more than that of, say, the secretary of state, 'for the simple reason that he stands in the chain of command to the military forces that would be used to do the fighting' (Ephron et al 2007). As a former top national security official explained, the President could have removed Gates but he could not do so quietly. 'The president is not a dummy. If he had the defense secretary he had in 2001, it would be easy. Rumsfeld would have just said, "Yes". But Bush can't do anything over the opposition of the Secretary of Defense and the chairman of the JCS' (quoted in Ephron et al 2007). Nor, for that matter, can President Obama.

The second asset that strengthened Gates' hand in the struggle over Iran policy was his considerable political autonomy, first as a relatively independent player within a Republican administration, then as the most prominent registered Republican in a Democratic cabinet. According to Kaplan (2006), in his confirmation hearing Gates came across as 'that entity that Washington has not seen for many years: a truly independent secretary of defense. "I don't owe anybody anything," Gates told Sen. Edward Kennedy ... when asked whether he'd be loyal to truth or to power.' Gates did not 'owe anybody anything' because, although he had worked for the government for many years, since stepping down from the directorship of the CIA in 1993 he had largely held academic posts and lived away from Washington. He was known to be extremely happy with his job as president of Texas A&M University, which he assumed in 2002, and in 2005 he even turned down President Bush's offer to become DNI (Kaplan 2006; 2010). Thus, Gates appeared to have 'no need for this job, no stake in the town [Washington], and no interests in its arbitrary rituals' (Kaplan 2006). Coupled with the urgency and high political stakes of the challenges the new secretary of defense was expected to tackle—turning Iraq around and shoring up the military—this state of affairs meant that President Bush was dependent on Secretary Gates as much as the other way around. By the same token, the status of Gates as a Republican in President Obama's cabinet has meant that the President to some degree has depended on him for protection from right-wing attacks on the administration's foreign policy. In the words of a Democratic foreign policy hand, 'The reality is that no one, including the White House, is willing to cross Gates because we desperately need him for political cover on everything.' It is partly for this reason that Gates was able to establish himself as 'unquestionably the most powerful member of the Obama Cabinet—the only one with the muscle to push back' (Smith et al 2010).

Finally, the third asset that allowed Gates to successfully lead the opposition to bombing Iran was the tremendous bureaucratic skills he has developed in his 26 years of government service (Kaplan 2006). During his first year in office Gates used these skills ‘to lower the temperature on Iran’ by cautioning military commanders in the Gulf against the risk of accidents that might provoke war and by paring down strike options against Iran. Additionally, Gates shrewdly allowed, possibly even encouraged, the top brass to publicly express their reservations about attacking Iran, ‘which ma[de] it much harder for the White House to steamroll them’ (Ephron et al 2007). Most important, Gates—who was described by a colleague as being ‘by nature an alliance-builder’ (Smith et al 2010)—has been able to foster close working relationships with the secretary of state in both the Bush and Obama administrations. That the secretary of defense and other foreign policy principals would work well together can hardly be taken for granted—Rumsfeld, for example, famously quarrelled with Secretary of State Colin Powell during the first term of the Bush administration; Rumsfeld also sought to dominate National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. By contrast, when Gates assumed the Pentagon’s top post he quickly established a ‘friendly and collegial’ relationship with Secretary of State Rice. In establishing this relationship Gates took advantage of the fact that Rice used to work for him when he served as deputy national security adviser to the elder President Bush, but another important fact—that Rice enjoyed a close personal bond with George W Bush—must not have escaped Gates’ notice either (Ephron et al 2007). In the Obama cabinet Gates similarly built a tight alliance with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. While Clinton helped save Gates from isolation as a Republican in a Democratic administration, Gates, for his part, helped smooth Clinton’s access to White House staff members, some of whom maintained residual grudges towards her from the bitter 2008 Democratic primaries. Gates and Clinton met regularly and they came to agree on virtually every major foreign policy issue, including Iran (Smith et al 2010). The alliances Gates built with Rice and Clinton made his opposition to bombing Iran more effective than it would have been had he behaved, like many of his predecessors, haughtily towards Foggy Bottom.

In sum, the role played by Secretary Gates in thwarting the Bomb Iran forces in Washington cannot be overestimated. Without discounting the important roles played by Condoleezza Rice, the State Department bureaucrats, leaders of the intelligence community, and the top brass, it would be no exaggeration to say that, if one person were to receive the top credit for preventing an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities, it would be Robert Gates.

Conclusion

Allison’s (1969, 707) statement that ‘What the nation does is sometimes the result of the triumph of one group over others’ aptly describes the making of US policy towards Tehran’s nuclear programme in recent years. America’s abstention from attacking Iran’s nuclear installations has been an ‘intra-national political outcome’ (Allison 1969, 707) of a battle in which bureaucratic organizations opposing a military strike—the Pentagon, JCS, Department of State and intelligence community—have prevailed over bureaucratic and political actors pressing for greater consideration of military options, including (in the Bush administration) the office of Vice President Richard Cheney, members of Congress from both

political parties, and AIPAC. In significant part this triumph can be credited to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, whose critical position in the chain of command, political independence and bureaucratic-political skills combined to render him an extremely effective player on the chessboard on which Iran policy was shaped.

Secretary Gates stepped down from his post on 30 June 2011 (Ukman 2011). Much like Gates, his successor, Leon Panetta, is a 'quintessential Washington player' who has proven his ability to 'deftly outmaneuver rivals in bureaucratic battles' and whose long résumé includes a stint (2009–2011) at the helm of the CIA (Whitlock 2011). It is not clear, however, whether Panetta shares his predecessor's strong aversion to military strikes against Iran. On the one hand, as CIA director Panetta travelled to Israel in January 2010 to sternly warn the Netanyahu government against a unilateral attack on Iran's nuclear facilities (Guttman 2011b). On the other hand, whereas Gates, in his 2006 Senate confirmation hearing, explicitly cautioned against attacking Iran, Panetta, in his own confirmation hearing, rehearsed without qualification the Obama administration's position that 'we should keep all options on the table'.²⁸ To the extent that Panetta is less steadfastly opposed than Gates was to attacking Iran, is such an attack becoming more likely?

Not necessarily, for the alternative policies adopted by the Bush and Obama administrations as a result of the strong resistance to military action led by Gates appear to be bearing some fruit. As the *New York Times* reported, once 'Mr. [George W] Bush became convinced by top administration officials, led by Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, that any overt attack on Iran would probably prove ineffective', the President instead 'embraced more intensive covert operations aimed at Iran', including efforts to sabotage centrifuges used for uranium enrichment and to damage the industrial infrastructure that supports Iran's nuclear programme (Sanger 2009). Recent reports suggest that this covert campaign, which was sped up by President Obama and which appears to be coordinated with Israel (Broad et al 2011), has scored some significant successes. In 2010 and 2011 a series of attacks in Tehran, for which the Iranian government blamed Israel and the United States, reportedly killed or seriously injured several leading nuclear scientists (Dehghan and Siddique 2010; Jaseb 2011). More important, hundreds of Iranian centrifuges have been disabled by a computer worm called Stuxnet that was 'precisely calibrated' to send the centrifuges 'wildly out of control'. The chief cybersecurity expert of the Department of Homeland Security 'told a Senate committee that the worm was a "game changer" because of the skill with which it was composed and the care with which it was geared towards attacking specific types of equipment' (Broad and Sanger 2010).²⁹ The damage caused by Stuxnet was surely on the mind of the outgoing chief of the Israeli Mossad, Meir Dagan, when he publicly declared in January 2011 that 'a series of malfunctions had put off [Iran's] nuclear goal for several years' (Melman 2011).

²⁸ See page 18 of the transcript of Panetta's hearing at < <http://armed-services.senate.gov/Transcripts/2011/06%20June/11-47%20-%206-9-11.pdf>>, accessed 22 July 2011.

²⁹ Virtually all the government and private experts quoted in the press reports about Stuxnet shared the view that this cyber-worm significantly set back the Iranian nuclear programme (see, for example, Broad et al 2011). A dissenting, more pessimistic assessment advanced in early 2011 by physicist Ivanka Barzashka, then with the Federation of American Scientists, was strongly disputed by David Albright, President of the Institute for Science and International Security in Washington (Weinberger 2011).

Additionally, there are indications that the strengthened economic sanctions regime orchestrated by the Obama administration is taking a heavier toll on Iran than most experts have expected (Sanger 2010a). The global financial activities of Iranian banks have reportedly been severely curtailed (Kessler 2010) and the Iranians have 'faced difficulties refueling airplanes in Europe, getting some ports to accept their ships and attracting much-needed investment for oil production' (Sanger 2010a).

The apparent effectiveness of the sanctions regime and the apparent successes of covert efforts to sabotage Iran's nuclear programme are bound to make an overt attack on Iran appear less urgent, thus strengthening the hand of bureaucratic actors opposed to military strikes. Therefore, barring the emergence of dramatic new evidence of Iran's nuclear intentions—for example, a new NIE concluding with high confidence that Iran has earnestly resumed its nuclear weaponization efforts—it is likely that, in the foreseeable future, the policies that Secretary Gates was instrumental in shaping will outlast his tenure at the Pentagon.

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