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Target: Negroponte & Iran

By Robert Parry
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In a replay of the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction charade, neoconservative supporters of George W. Bush are pushing the U.S. intelligence community to take a more alarmist view about Iran's nuclear program – only this time, the nation's top spy John Negroponte is resisting the pressure unlike former CIA chief George Tenet.

Tenet joined in Bush's hyping of the WMD evidence about Iraq – famously telling the President that the case was a “slam dunk.” But Negroponte is defying hardliners who want a worst-case scenario on Iran's capabilities. Instead, he is citing Iran's limited progress in refining uranium and their use of a cascade of only 164 centrifuges.

“According to the experts that I consult, achieving — getting 164 centrifuges to work is still a long way from having the capacity to manufacture sufficient fissile material for a nuclear weapon,” Negroponte said in an interview with NBC News on April 20.

“Our assessment is that the prospects of an Iranian weapon are still a number of years off, and probably into the next decade,” said Negroponte, who was appointed last year as the Director of National Intelligence, a new post that supplanted the traditional primacy of the CIA director as the head of the U.S. intelligence community.

Expressing a similar view about Iran's nuclear program in [a speech](#) at the National Press Club, Negroponte said, “I think it's important that this issue be kept in perspective.”

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In effect, the Director of National Intelligence was splashing cold water on the fevered assessment of Iran's nuclear progress favored by the neoconservatives. Some Bush supporters are now complaining that Negroponte has shown disloyalty to the President by siding with intelligence analysts who reject the direst predictions on Iran.

Frank J. Gaffney Jr. an original signer of the neoconservative Project for the New American Century, even called for Negroponte's firing because of the Iran assessment and his "abysmal personnel decisions" in hiring senior intelligence analysts who were skeptics about Bush's Iraqi WMD claims, too.

In [an article](#) for Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Washington Times, Gaffney attacked Negroponte for giving top analytical jobs to Thomas Fingar, who had served as assistant secretary of state for intelligence and research, and Kenneth Brill, who was U.S. ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency, which debunked some of the U.S. and British claims about Iraq seeking enriched uranium from Africa.

The State Department's Office of Intelligence and Research led the dissent against the Iraq WMD case, especially over what turned out to be false claims that Iraq was developing a nuclear bomb. Gaffney specifically faulted Fingar for his testimony against neoconservative favorite John Bolton to become U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

"Given this background, is it any wonder that Messrs. Negroponte, Fingar and Brill ... gave us the spectacle of absurdly declaring the Iranian regime to be years away from having nuclear weapons?" wrote Gaffney, who was a senior Pentagon official during the Reagan administration.

Gaffney accused Negroponte of giving promotions to "government officials in sensitive positions who actively subvert the President's policies," an apparent reference to Fingar and Brill. The neoconservatives have long believed that U.S. intelligence should fit administration policies, rather than inform them. [See Robert Parry's *Secrecy & Privilege*.]

Expectations

When Negroponte was appointed last year, the former ambassador to Honduras and Iraq was expected to be more of a team player. Known as an old Cold Warrior, Negroponte had overseen the U.S. Embassy in Honduras in the early 1980s when the CIA was organizing the contra paramilitary force to attack Nicaragua.

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Negroponete also was U.S. ambassador to the United Nations when the Bush administration made the false case that Iraq was concealing large WMD stockpiles. Negroponete – along with CIA Director Tenet – sat behind Secretary of State Colin Powell when he made his infamous speech to the U.N. Security Council on Feb. 5, 2003.

While some observers expected Negroponete to stay a yes-man for Bush as Director of National Intelligence, others who knew Negroponete suspected that he was too smart and too proud to follow the path of Tenet, who is widely disdained inside the intelligence community for letting the analytic product be thoroughly politicized and corrupted.

Having demonstrated a measure of independence on Iran, Negroponete also is under attack for allegedly creating a bloated bureaucracy around his new office, which was created to address shortcomings exposed by the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks as well as the Iraq WMD intelligence failures.

Richard Posner, a well-known advocate of “preemptive” wars who once wrote that “the essence of self-defense is striking the first blow against your assailant,” denounced Negroponete’s office as “a bureaucratic layer” that causes “delay and loss of information from the bottom up [and] delay and misunderstanding of commands from the top down.”

The Republican-controlled House Intelligence Committee also has criticized Negroponete’s office for its spending. Chairman Peter Hoekstra, a Michigan Republican, said in March that he was concerned that the new office was “putting in more layers and slowing down the process.”

While some of that criticism may be valid, it’s typical of Washington’s infighting to see politicians pursuing one line of attack when they’re really upset about something else.

U.N. Report

The mounting criticism of Negroponete comes as the Bush administration seeks to make the most of a mixed report by the U.N.’s International Atomic Energy Agency, which stated on April 28 that the lack of clarity around Iran’s nuclear program remains “a matter of concern” as do Iran’s intentions.

While Bush cited the critical aspects of the IAEA report as evidence that a tougher

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line must be taken against Iran, the report also bolsters Negroponte's assessment that the Iranians are still far away from having the capacity to build a nuclear bomb.

The IAEA said it took samples of Iran's enriched uranium and confirmed that it was processed only to an enrichment level of about 3.6 percent, when a level of at least 90 percent is needed to make a nuclear bomb. The low level of enrichment would fit better for production of nuclear energy, which is all the Iranians say they want.

But Bush and his neoconservative advisers may believe that their window for forcing regime change in Iran is closing. The November 2006 elections could bring Republican reversals and leave Bush with less flexibility for launching bombing raids against Iran should he opt for a military attack as many experts believe he will.

So, to make the case with the American people, the neoconservatives first need to secure a more frightening assessment of Iran's nuclear weapons potential from Negroponte and the U.S. intelligence community.

As long as the intelligence analysts judge that Iran is years away from even the possibility of nuclear weapons, the argument for another "preemptive" war against a Muslim nation would be a hard sell.

The Bush administration is still reeling from disclosures that it fixed the WMD intelligence to justify the Iraq War, which so far has claimed the lives of about 2,400 U.S. soldiers and tens of thousands of Iraqis.

The latest former CIA officer to speak out against the bogus intelligence was Tyler Drumheller, the chief of CIA covert operations in Europe.

"It just sticks in my craw every time I hear them say it's an intelligence failure," Drumheller told CBS's "60 Minutes" in an interview broadcast April 23, 2006. "This was a policy failure. ... The idea of going after Iraq was U.S. policy. It was going to happen one way or the other."

Drumheller said the White House even ignored intelligence that the CIA got from Saddam Hussein's foreign minister, Naji Sabri. The information was rebuffed because Sabri said Iraq didn't have WMD.

"The policy was set," Drumheller said. "The war in Iraq was coming. And they [White House officials] were looking for intelligence to fit into the policy, to justify the policy."

Now, the first battle in a prospective “preemptive” war with Iran may be fought over ousting or intimidating Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte – which would then be followed by a whole new round of making the intelligence fit the policy.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Secrecy & Privilege: Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq*, can be ordered at secrecyandprivilege.com. It's also available at Amazon.com, as is his 1999 book, *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth.'*

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