

War on Iraq



Neocons in Cheney's Office Fund al Qaeda-Tied Groups ... and No One Cares?

By [Tom Engelhardt](#), [Tomdispatch.com](#). Posted [March 17, 2007](#).

Seymour Hersh's recent report that Iran-Contra veterans working out of Dick Cheney's office are using stolen funds from Iraq to arm al Qaeda-tied groups and foment a larger Sunni-Shia war is a *very big deal*.

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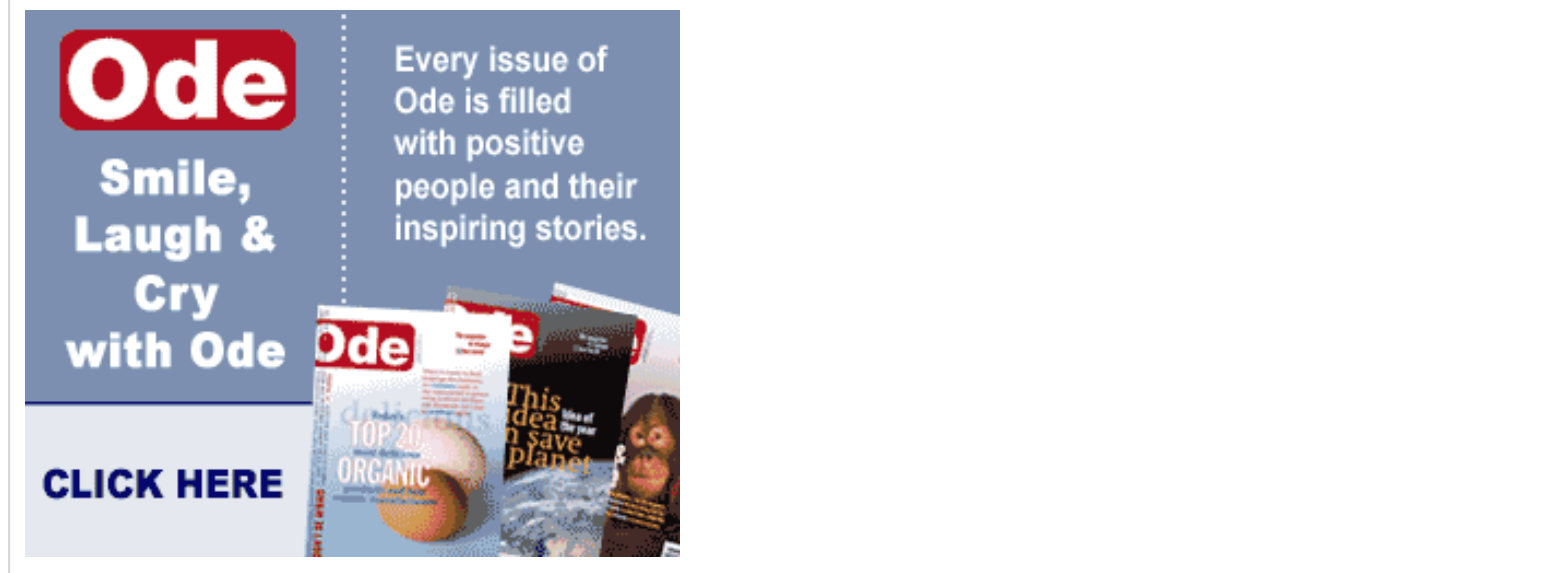
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Let me see if I've got this straight.

Perhaps two years ago, an "informal" meeting of "veterans" of the 1980s Iran-Contra scandal -- holding positions in the Bush administration -- was convened by Deputy National Security Advisor [Elliott Abrams](#). Discussed were the "lessons learned" from that labyrinthine, secret, and illegal arms-for-money-for-arms deal involving the Israelis, the Iranians, the Saudis, and the Contras of Nicaragua, among others -- and meant to evade the Boland Amendment, a congressionally passed attempt to outlaw Reagan administration assistance to the anti-communist Contras.

In terms of getting around Congress, the Iran-Contra vets concluded, the complex operation had been a success -- and would have worked far better if the CIA and the military had been kept out of the loop and the whole thing had been run out of the Vice President's office.

Subsequently, some of those conspirators, once again with the financial support and help of the Saudis (and probably the Israelis and the Brits), began running a similar operation, aimed at avoiding congressional scrutiny or public accountability of any sort, out of Vice President Cheney's office. They dipped into "black pools of money," possibly stolen from the billions of Iraqi oil dollars that have [never been accounted for](#) since the American occupation began.

Some of these funds, as well as Saudi ones, were evidently funneled through the embattled, Sunni-dominated Lebanese government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora to the sort of Sunni *jihadi* groups ("some sympathetic to al-Qaeda") whose members might normally fear ending up in Guantanamo and to a group, or groups, associated with the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood.

All of this was being done as part of a "sea change" in the Bush administration's Middle Eastern policies aimed at rallying friendly Sunni regimes against Shiite Iran, as well as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Syrian government -- and launching secret operations to undermine, roll back, or destroy all of the above. Despite the fact that the Bush administration is officially at war with Sunni extremism in Iraq (and in the more general Global War on Terror), despite its support for the largely Shiite government, allied to Iran, that it has brought to power in Iraq, and despite its dislike for the Sunni-Shiite civil war in that country, some of its top officials may be covertly encouraging a far greater Sunni-Shiite rift in the region.

Imagine. All this and much more (including news of U.S. military border-crossings into Iran, new preparations that would allow George W. Bush to order a massive air attack on that land with only 24-hours notice, and a brief window this spring when the staggering power of four U.S. aircraft-carrier battle groups might be available to the President in the Persian Gulf) was revealed, often in remarkable detail, just over a week ago in ["The Redirection,"](#) a Seymour Hersh piece in the *New Yorker*. Hersh, the man who first broke the My Lai story in the Vietnam era, has never been off his game since. In recent years, from the [Abu Ghraib](#)

[scandal](#) on, he has consistently released explosive news about the plans and acts of the Bush administration.

Imagine, in addition, that Hersh went on [Democracy Now!](#), *Fresh Air*, [Hardball](#) with Chris Matthew, and [CNN Late Edition](#) with Wolf Blitzer and actually elaborated on these claims and revelations, some of which, on the face of it, seem like potentially illegal and impeachable offenses, if they do indeed reach up to the Vice President or President.

Now imagine the response: Front-page headlines; editorials nationwide calling for answers, Congressional hearings, or even the appointment of a special prosecutor to look into some of the claims; a raft of op-ed page pieces by the nation's leading columnists asking questions, demanding answers, reminding us of the history of Iran-Contra; bold reporters from a recently freed media standing up in White House and Defense Department press briefings to demand more information on Hersh's various charges; calls in Congress for hearings and investigations into why the people's representatives were left so totally out of this loop.

Uh ...

All I can say is: If any of this happened, I haven't been able to discover it. As far as I can tell, no one in the mainstream even blinked on the Iran-Contra angle or the possibility that a vast, secret Middle Eastern operation is being run, possibly illegally and based on stolen funds and Saudi money, out of the Vice President's office. You can certainly find a few [pieces](#) on, or reports about, "The Redirection" -- all focused only on the possible build-up to a war with Iran -- and the odd wire-service [mention](#) of it; but nothing major, nothing Earth-shaking or eye-popping; not, in fact, a single obvious editorial or op-ed piece in the mainstream; no journalistic questions publicly asked of the administration; no Congressional cries of horror; no calls anywhere for investigations or hearings on any of Hersh's revelations, not even an expression of fear somewhere that we might be seeing Iran-Contra, the sequel, in our own moment.

This, it seems to me, adds up to a remarkable non-response to claims that, if true, should gravely concern Congress, the media, and the nation. Let's grant that Hersh's *New Yorker* pieces generally arrive unsourced and filled with anonymous officials ("a former senior intelligence official," "a U.S. government consultant with close ties to Israel"). Nonetheless, Hersh has long mined his sources in the Intelligence Community and the military to striking effect. Undoubtedly, the lack of sourcing makes it harder for other reporters to follow-up, though when it comes to papers like the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, you would think that they might have Washington sources of their own to query on Hersh's claims. And, of course, editorial pages, columnists, op-ed editors, Congressional representatives, and reporters at administration news briefings don't need to do any footwork at all to raise these subjects. (Consider, for instance, the [White House press briefing](#) on April 10, 2006, where a reporter did indeed ask a question based on an earlier Hersh *New Yorker* piece.) As far as I can tell, there haven't even been denunciations of Hersh's report or suggestions anywhere that it was inaccurate or off-base. Just the equivalent of a giant, collective shrug of the media's rather scrawny shoulders.

Since the response to Hersh's remarkable piece has been so tepid in places where it should count, let me take up just a few of the many issues his report raises.

"Meddling" in Iran

For at least a month now, our press and TV news have been full to the brim with mile-high headlines and top-of-the-news stories recounting (and, more rarely, disputing) Bush administration claims of Iranian "interference" or "meddling" in Iraq (where U.S. military spokesmen regularly refer to the Iraqi insurgents they are fighting as "anti-Iraq forces"). Since Hersh published ["Plan B"](#) in the *New Yorker* in June 2004 in which he claimed that the Israelis were "running covert operations inside Kurdish areas of Iran and Syria," he has been on the other side of this story.

In ["The Coming Wars"](#) in January of 2005, he first reported that the Bush administration, like the Israelis, had been "conducting secret reconnaissance missions inside Iran at least since" the summer of 2004. In April of 2006 in ["The Iran Plans,"](#) he reported that the Bush administration was eager to put the "nuclear option" on the table in any future air assault on Iranian nuclear facilities (and that some in the Pentagon, fiercely opposed, had at least temporarily thwarted planning for the possible use of

nuclear bunker-busters in Iran). He also reported that American combat units were "on the ground" in Iran, marking targets for any future air attack, and quoted an unnamed source as claiming that they were also "working with minority groups in Iran, including the Azeris, in the north, the Baluchis, in the southeast, and the Kurds, in the northeast. The troops are studying the terrain, and giving away walking-around money to ethnic tribes, and recruiting scouts from local tribes and shepherds,' the consultant said. One goal is to get 'eyes on the ground' ... The broader aim, the consultant said, is to 'encourage ethnic tensions' and undermine the regime."

In "The Redirection," he now claims that, in search of Iranian rollback and possible regime change, "American military and special-operations teams have escalated their activities in Iran to gather intelligence and, according to a Pentagon consultant on terrorism and the former senior intelligence official, have also crossed the [Iranian] border in pursuit of Iranian operatives from Iraq." In his *Democracy Now!* radio interview, he added: "[W]e have been deeply involved with Azeris and Baluchis and Iranian Kurds in terror activities inside the country ... and, of course, the Israelis have been involved in a lot of that through Kurdistan ... Iran has been having sort of a series of backdoor fights, the Iranian government, because ... they have a significant minority population. Not everybody there is a Persian. If you add up the Azeris and Baluchis and Kurds, you're really 30-some [%], maybe even 40% of the country."

In addition, he reported that "a special planning group has been established in the offices of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, charged with creating a contingency bombing plan for Iran that can be implemented, upon orders from the President, within twenty-four hours," and that its "new assignment" was to identify not just nuclear facilities and possible regime-change targets, but "targets in Iran that may be involved in supplying or aiding militants in Iraq."

Were there nothing else in Hersh's most recent piece, all of this would still have been significant news -- if we didn't happen to live on a one-way imperial planet in which Iranian "interference" in (American) Iraq is an outrage, but secret U.S. operations in, and military plans to devastate, Iran are your basic ho-hum issue. Our mainstream news purveyors don't generally consider the issue of our "interference" in Iran worthy of a great deal of reporting, nor do our pundits consider it a topic worthy of speculation or consideration; nor, in a Congress where leading Democrats have regularly outflanked the Bush administration in hawkish positions on Iran, is this likely to be much of an issue.

You can [read abroad](#) about rumored American operations out of Pakistan and Afghanistan aimed at unsettling Iranian minorities like the Baluchis and about possible [operations](#) to create strife among Arab minorities in southern Iran near the Iraqi border -- the Iranians seem to blame the British, whose troops are in southern Iraq, for some of this (a charge vociferously [denied](#) by the British embassy in Tehran) -- but it's not a topic of great interest here.

In recent months, in fact, [several bombs](#) have [gone off](#) in minority regions of Iran. These explosions have been reported here, but you would be hard-pressed to find out what the Iranians had to say about them, and the possibility that any of these might prove part of a U.S. (or Anglo-American) covert campaign to destabilize the Iranian fundamentalist regime basically doesn't concern the news mind here, even though past history says it should. After all, many of our present Middle Eastern problems can be indirectly traced back to the Anglo-American ur-moment in the Middle East, the successful CIA-British-intelligence plot in 1953 to [oust](#) Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh (who had nationalized the Iranian oil industry) and install the young Shah in power.

After all, in the 1980s, in the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan, the CIA (with the eager connivance of the Pakistanis and the Saudis) helped organize, arm, and fund the Islamic extremists who would someday turn on us for terror campaigns on a major scale. As [Steve Coll](#) reported in his superb book *Ghost Wars*, for instance, "Under ISI [Pakistani intelligence] direction, the *mujahedin* received training and malleable explosives to mount car-bomb and even camel-bomb attacks in Soviet-occupied cities, usually designed to kill Soviet soldiers and commanders. [CIA Director William] Casey endorsed these despite the qualms of some CIA career officers."

[Similarly](#), in the early 1990s, the Iraq National Accord, an organization run by the CIA's Iraqi exile of choice, Iyad Allawi, evidently planted, under the Agency's direction, car bombs and explosive devices in Baghdad (including in a movie theater) in a fruitless attempt to destabilize Saddam Hussein's regime. [The New York Times](#) reported this on its front page in June 2004 (to

no effect whatsoever), when Allawi was the Prime Minister of American-occupied Iraq.

Who knows where the funding, training, and equipment for the bombings in Iran are coming from -- but, at a moment when charges that the Iranians are sending into Iraq advanced IEDs, or the means to produce them, are the rage, it seems a germane subject.

In this country, it's a no-brainer that the Iranians have no right whatsoever to put their people, overtly or covertly, into neighboring Iraq, a country which, back in the 1980s, invaded Iran and fought a bitter eight-year war with it, resulting in perhaps a million casualties; but it's just normal behavior for the Pentagon to have traveled halfway across the planet to dominate the Iraqi military, garrison Iraq with a string of vast permanent bases, build the largest embassy on the planet in Baghdad's Green Zone, and send special-operations teams (and undoubtedly CIA teams as well) across the Iranian border, or to insert them in Iran to do "reconnaissance" or even to foment unrest among its minorities. This is the definition of an imperial worldview.

Sleepless Nights

Let's leave Iran now and briefly take up a couple of other matters highlighted in "The Redirection" that certainly should have raised the odd red flag and pushed the odd alarm button here at home far more than his Iranian news (which did at least get some attention):

1. *Iran-Contra Redux*: Does it raise no eyebrows that, under the leadership of Elliot Abrams (who in the Iran-Contra period pleaded guilty to two counts of unlawfully withholding information from Congress and was later pardoned), such a meeting was held? Does no one want to confirm that this happened? Does no one want to know who attended? Iran-Contra alumni in the Bush administration at one time or another included former Reagan National Security Advisor [John Poindexter](#), [Otto Reich](#), [John Negroponte](#) (who, Hersh claims, recently left his post as Director of National Intelligence in order to avoid the twenty-first century version of Iran-Contra -- "No way. I'm not going down that road again, with the N.S.C. [National Security Council] running operations off the books, with no [presidential] finding."), [Roger Noriega](#), and Robert Gates. Did the Vice President or President sit in? Was either of them informed about the "lessons drawn"? Were the Vice President's right-hand men, I. Lewis Libby and/or David Addington in any way involved? Who knows? In the Iran-Contra affair, the Reagan administration drew together the seediest collection of freelance arms dealers, intelligence agents, allies, and -- in the case of Ayatollah Khomeini's Iranian regime -- sworn enemies in what can only be called "amateur hour" at the White House. Now, it looks like the Bush administration is heading down a similar path and, given its previous "amateur hour" [reputation](#) in foreign policy, imagine what this is likely to mean.

2. *Jihadis as Proxies*: Using *jihadis* as American [proxies](#) in a struggle to rollback Iran -- with the help of the Saudis -- should have rung a few bells somewhere in American memory as another been-there, done-that moment. In the 1980s -- on the theory that my enemy's enemy is my friend -- the fundamentalist Catholic CIA Director William Casey came to believe that Islamic fundamentalists could prove tight and trustworthy allies in rolling back the Soviet Union. In Afghanistan, as a result, the CIA, backed by the Saudis royals, who themselves represented an extremist form of Sunni Islam, regularly favored and funded the most extreme of the *mujahedeen* ready to fight the Soviets. Who can forget the results? Today, according to Hersh, the Saudis are reassuring key figures in the administration that this time they have the *jihadis* to whom funds are flowing under control. No problem. If you believe that, you'll believe anything.

3. *Congress in the Dark*: Hersh claims that, with the help of Saudi National Security Adviser Prince Bandar bin Sultan (buddy to the Bushes and Dick Cheney's close comrade-in-arms), the people running the black-ops programs out of Cheney's office have managed to run circles around any possibility of Congressional oversight, leaving the institution completely "in the dark," which is undoubtedly exactly where Congress wanted to be for the last six years. Is this still true? The non-reaction to the Hersh piece isn't exactly encouraging.

To summarize, if Hersh is to be believed -- and as a major journalistic figure for the last near-40 years he certainly deserves to be taken seriously -- the Bush administration seems to be repeating the worst mistakes of the Reagan administration *and* of the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan, which led inexorably to the greatest acts of blowback in our history. Given what we already know

about the Bush administration, Americans should be up nights worrying about what all this means now as well as down the line. For Congress, the media, and Americans in general, this report should have been not just a wake-up call, but a shout for an all-nighter with NoDoz.

In my childhood, one of the Philadelphia papers regularly ran cartoon ads for itself in which some poor soul in a perilous situation -- say, clinging to the ledge of a tall building -- would be screaming for help, while passersby were so engrossed in the paper that they didn't even look up. Now, we have the opposite situation. A journalist essentially writing bloody murder in a giant media and governmental crowd. In this case, no one in the mainstream evidently cares -- not yet anyway -- to pay the slightest attention. It seems that there's a crime going on and no one gives a damn. Think [Kitty Genovese](#) on a giant scale.

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Tom Engelhardt, editor of [Tomdispatch.com](#), is co-founder of the American Empire Project and author of [The End of Victory Culture](#).

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Careful AlterNet, 9/11 Truth is just around the corner.

Posted by: LeftWright on Mar 17, 2007 12:30 AM

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If you'd read Michel Chossudovsky or Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed then you'd already know that "al Qaeda" is simply a creation of the ISI, CIA, MI6 and Saudi Intelligence.

Finally realizing the GWOT is something other than what dear Georgie and Dickie told you?

Keep digging, AlterNet, you don't want to be the last one to figure it out.

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