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The Liberation of US Foreign Policy

By Justin Raimondo

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The Iran deal is a turning point in US foreign policy, and its approval by Congress will represent a sea change in American politics: it will mark nothing less than a day of liberation which future generations might dub “VI Day” – victory over Israel day.

The post-9/11 era saw the already formidable power of Israel’s lobby in the US rise to make it the decisive factor in any foreign policy debate: a heavyweight became a crushing weight, one that leveled any and all opposition to US intervention abroad under the steel toe of the “war on terrorism.” The Lobby’s role in ginning up the invasion and conquest of Iraq is well-documented in Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer’s *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*, and there is no need to replicate their detective work here. I would merely add that, even before the Iraq invasion, then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon issued fresh marching orders to the US military, specifying Iran, Libya, and Syria as the next victims on Tel Aviv’s list. As *Ha’aretz* reported in 2003, before the invasion of Iraq was even launched:

“These are irresponsible states, which must be disarmed of weapons mass destruction, and a successful American move in Iraq as a model will make that easier to achieve,” Sharon said to a visiting delegation of American congressmen.

“Sharon told the congressmen that Israel was not involved in the war with Iraq ‘but the American action is of vital importance.’

“In a meeting with U.S. Undersecretary of State John Bolton yesterday, Sharon said that Israel was concerned about the security threat posed by Iran, and stressed that it was important to deal with Iran even while American attention was focused on Iraq.

“Bolton said in meetings with Israeli officials that he had no doubt America would attack Iraq, and that it would be necessary thereafter to deal with threats from Syria, Iran and North Korea.”

As the saying goes: and the rest is history.

The 9/11 attacks paved the way for America’s Thermidor. The crisis empowered the neoconservative coven embedded in the Bush White House and in the top echelons of the national security bureaucracy, which effectively pulled off a *coup d’etat*. As Bob Woodward reported in his book *Plan of Attack*:

“[Then Secretary of State Colin] Powell felt Cheney and his allies – his chief aide, I. Lewis ‘Scooter’ Libby, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas J. Feith and what Powell called Feith’s ‘Gestapo’ office – had established what amounted to a separate government.”

The signing of the Iran deal, and its probable approval by Congress – it doesn’t look like the War Party has the votes to overturn it – heralds the victory of the counter coup, i.e. the overthrow of the Lobby’s stranglehold and the eventual restoration of a pro-American foreign policy. This was evident in practically every line of President Obama’s recent speech at American University, and the text deserves closer examination than it has so far gotten.

Obama started out by invoking John F. Kennedy’s speech of June 10, 1963, delivered at the same venue: a remarkable oration, in which the young President, who would fall to an assassin’s bullet in less than six months, asked Americans to reconsider the myths of the cold war and called for a practicable peace with the Soviet Union. In the speech Kennedy went after the neocons of his day, who were calling for military measures to “roll back” the Soviet Union and demanding an end to any effort to reach an arms control accord. Kennedy, Obama recalled,

“[R]ejected the prevailing attitude among some foreign policy circles that equated security with a perpetual war footing. Instead, he promised strong, principled American leadership on behalf of what he called a ‘practical’ and ‘attainable peace’ – a peace ‘based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions – on a series of concrete actions and effective agreements.’”

It was a long way from “pay any price, bear any burden,” the militaristic leitmotif of his inaugural address.

Obama goes on to describe the series of arms control measures adopted by successive administrations of both parties, and the subsequent implosion of the Soviet bloc, celebrating our victory in the cold war “without firing a shot at the Soviets.” Segueing into his defense of the Iran deal, the President commences firing at the neocons of today:

“Between now and the congressional vote in September, you’re going to hear a lot of arguments against this deal, backed by tens of millions of dollars in advertising. And if the rhetoric in these ads, and the accompanying commentary, sounds familiar, it should – for many of the same people who argued for the war in Iraq are now making the case against the Iran nuclear deal.”

One can almost hear the squirming of the neocons as Obama attacks the soft underbelly of the GOP opposition. Here, after all, is a party that is unanimous in its unwillingness to learn anything from its recent series of repudiations at the polls, or from the bloody history of what the late General William E. Odom called the worst disaster in American military history. Yes, it’s the very same people – the Kristols, the Kagans, the Krauthammers, and the rest of that Jacobin-“conservative” crowd – who lied us into war and who are now clamoring for yet another bloodbath in the Middle East. One could only stand and cheer as the President called out the neocons:

“Now, when I ran for President eight years ago as a candidate who had opposed the decision to go to war in Iraq, I said that America didn’t just have to end that war – we had to end the mindset that got us there in the first place. It was a mindset characterized by a preference for military action over diplomacy; a mindset that put a premium on unilateral US action over the painstaking work of building international consensus; a mindset that exaggerated threats beyond what the intelligence supported. Leaders did not level with the American people about the costs of war, insisting that we could easily impose our will on a part of the world with a profoundly different culture and history. And, of course, those calling for war labeled themselves strong and decisive, while dismissing those who disagreed as weak – even appeasers of a malevolent adversary.”

Obama doesn’t name the mindset that led us to disaster in Iraq, but it’s clear he’s describing the neoconservative mind – a mentality awash in visions of conquest and hubristic delusion, one prone to uttering “exaggerated threats beyond what the intelligence supported.” He doesn’t quite accuse the neocons of lying us into war, but he comes fairly close: close enough to make the targets of his ire recognizable.

The President asks us to do what is rarely done in a country that lives in the moment: he wants us to *remember*. Do you remember who led us to ruin last time? Remember who accused the prescient critics of the rush to war of treason? Remember who has been *wrong about everything* for the past decade and a half?

Now all this is generally known, at least outside of the world of Sean Hannity, Breitbart.com, and the GOP fringe, but the effects of the Cheney coup are still with us. The neocons are out of power, at least officially, but their penumbra remains, hovering over Washington like a radioactive cloud. And we are still haunted by the horrific consequences of Cheneyism-in power. The President recognizes this:

“More than a decade later, we still live with the consequences of the decision to invade Iraq. Our troops achieved every mission they were given. But thousands of lives were lost, tens of thousands wounded. That doesn’t count the lives lost among Iraqis. Nearly a trillion dollars was spent. Today, Iraq remains gripped by sectarian conflict, and the emergence of al Qaeda in Iraq

has now evolved into ISIL. And ironically, the single greatest beneficiary in the region of that war was the Islamic Republic of Iran, which saw its strategic position strengthened by the removal of its long-standing enemy, Saddam Hussein.”

This is a profoundly conservative speech in the sense that the President exhorts us to look to the lessons of history in order to chart a path to the future.

“I raise this recent history because now more than ever we need clear thinking in our foreign policy. And I raise this history because it bears directly on how we respond to the Iranian nuclear program.”

Ron Paul raised Republican eyebrows when he famously attributed the 9/11 attacks to “blowback,” and faced down the bombast of Rudy Giuliani in front of a jeering crowd. Paul rose to prominence as the direct result of that encounter because he was clearly speaking truth to power – and the sheer radicalism of his stand inspired many thousands. Obama is here doing something similar, if not quite so eye-opening, when he describes the largely unknown history of Iran’s nuclear program as a product of ...US intervention: “That program has been around for decades,” he said, “dating back to the Shah’s efforts – with US support – in the 1960s and ’70s to develop nuclear power.” He goes on to describe the real history of the program, attributing its weaponization to the Iraq-Iran war – “in which Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons to brutal effect” – albeit without mentioning that the US provided those chemical weapons to Saddam. Oh well, there’s only so much real history Americans can take in a single sitting....

With the Cheney regime out of office, and a new administration in place, the Iranians – who had no operating centrifuges in 2001 – now had thousands of centrifuges spinning away: another deadly legacy of the neocon coup. The neocons had set a booby-trap ready to spring on the next occupant of the White House: the “blowback” from their constant threats directed at Tehran (and the history of US imperialism in the region) set the Iranians on a course that could only end in war between Tehran and the West. Yet this President was determined not to go there.

Obama’s history of the sanctions regime is completely dishonest: but one doesn’t expect anything else from him on this point. He claims the sanctions brought the Iranians to the negotiating table, and yet our own intelligence community confirmed what the Iranians have been saying all along: their nuclear weapons program was abandoned in 2003 and never restarted. They had publicly abjured nuclear weapons, and Ayatollah Khamenei had released a *fatwa* declaring their development impermissible under Islamic law. In short: there never was much of a nuclear threat from Iran. Yet there was the looming possibility that what happened to Iraq would happen to them: and if they were going to be attacked anyway, as the Iranian hard-liners insisted, then they might as well have some means of defense. And so the possibility that they would try to develop them in the future could not be entirely discounted – yet more “blowback” from the heyday of the neocon coup.

At any rate, Obama went on to negotiate what is the most stringent nuclear arms control regime in history, and as he told that story he went through the various “talking points” opponents of the deal have put forth. I won’t go into them here – I’ve written on this issue before, and, besides that, there is plenty of other material on this site that covers these questions more than

adequately. Because the real issue is this: since there is no “better deal,” but only this deal, and because, as Obama puts it, “more sanctions won’t produce the results that the critics want, we have to be honest”:

“Congressional rejection of this deal leaves any US administration that is absolutely committed to preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon with one option – another war in the Middle East.

“I say this not to be provocative. I am stating a fact. Without this deal, Iran will be in a position – however tough our rhetoric may be – to steadily advance its capabilities. Its breakout time, which is already fairly small, could shrink to near zero. Does anyone really doubt that the same voices now raised against this deal will be demanding that whoever is President bomb those nuclear facilities?”

” ... So let’s not mince words. The choice we face is ultimately between diplomacy or some form of war – maybe not tomorrow, maybe not three months from now, but soon.”

No doubt many in his audience were well aware of Sen. Tom Cotton’s recent remarks to Israeli reporters making the case for war:

“You can destroy facilities. I don’t think any military expert in the United States or elsewhere would say the US military is not capable to setting Iran’s nuclear facilities back to day zero. Can we eliminate it forever? No, because any advanced industrialized country can develop nuclear weapons in four to seven years, from zero. But we can set them back to day zero.”

It’s only natural that Sen. Cotton was speaking to Israeli reporters, because this is precisely the Israeli case that he’s making. It’s clear that the Israelis want war, as they did in Iraq, and what’s more they want us to do their fighting for them. They want us to take out what they regard as their principal enemy in the region, and have others pay the price: Ariel Sharon made that clear way back in 2003. And that’s what the Israel lobby in this country is fighting for, which is why they are the loudest, most insistent opponents of the Iran deal.

And while Obama protested that he didn’t mean to be “provocative,” he aimed his remarks directly at Sen. Cotton and his Israeli fans when he said:

Now, there are some opponents – I have to give them credit; there are opponents of this deal who accept the choice of war. In fact, they argue that surgical strikes against Iran’s facilities will be quick and painless. But if we’ve learned anything from the last decade, it’s that wars in general and wars in the Middle East in particular are anything but simple. The only certainty in war is human suffering, uncertain costs, unintended consequences. We can also be sure that the Americans who bear the heaviest burden are the less than 1 percent of us, the outstanding men and women who serve in uniform, and not those of us who send them to war.”

Now that was a direct hit. The audience, I note, broke into sustained applause when he said Middle Eastern wars are “anything but simple,” and there’s no doubt the overwhelming majority

of American share this sentiment. It was, in short, another shot at the neocons – the most widely hated ideological grouping in the country since the decline of the Communists.

Standing behind the neocons are the Israelis: the mothership, so to speak. And Obama takes them on, too, in a passage I never thought I'd hear in a presidential speech:

“On the other hand, I do think it’s important to acknowledge another, more understandable motivation behind the opposition to this deal, or at least skepticism to this deal, and that is a sincere affinity for our friend and ally, Israel ...”

He goes on to say how much he shares this “affinity,” and how justified the fear of Iran is: there’s the obligatory invocation of the Holocaust, of Iranian anti-Semitism, and the litany of complaints the Israelis have about the “rough neighborhood” in which they have chosen to expropriate a country. Yet he goes on to remind them that what security they have is due to “American military and intelligence assistance, which my administration has provided at unprecedented levels.” Is there just the slightest hint that the Israelis are ingrates? And then he gets down to business:

“I recognize that Prime Minister Netanyahu disagrees – disagrees strongly. I do not doubt his sincerity. But I believe he is wrong. I believe the facts support this deal. I believe they are in America’s interest and Israel’s interest. And as President of the United States, it would be an abrogation of my constitutional duty to act against my best judgment simply because it causes temporary friction with a dear friend and ally. I do not believe that would be the right thing to do for the United States. I do not believe it would be the right thing to do for Israel.”

The reference to his constitutional duty is a clear reminder that the President’s chief obligation is to defend the interests of the United States of America. Yes, he contends that this deal is also in Israel’s best interests – and he makes a convincing case – but there’s no doubt where Obama’s duty lies. The message to Netanyahu, to Israel, and to the Israel lobby is clear: The days when America leapt when the Israeli Prime Minister said “Jump!” are over.

The Israelis recognize this. In an article in *Ha’aretz*, Barak David writes of the Israelis’ entirely justified fear that this marks “a real turning point in the strategic relations between Jerusalem and Washington”:

“Obama marked Netanyahu not as a major ally, but as his greatest political rival. ... At times you could hear Obama’s disdain for Netanyahu, as when he unconsciously imitated the latter’s baritone from his speeches against the nuclear agreement. ‘It’s a bad deal, we need a better deal,’ he said, as he deepened his voice.

“Obama isolated Netanyahu, portrayed him and his government as the only ones in the world who oppose the agreement, and positioned him as the head of the warmongering camp that rejects any diplomatic compromise of any kind, under any circumstances. The attempt by Netanyahu to scuttle the nuclear agreement, Obama wanted to say, is a cousin to the campaign conducted by those who supported the war in Iraq in 2003. It’s doubtful there is any group of people more disliked by the American public.”

By taking on the neocons and the Israelis in the same speech, and linking their arguments together, the President made his point indirectly – and far more effectively than if he had been more explicit. David continues:

“What should disturb the sleep of every Israeli is the fact that Netanyahu’s battle against the nuclear agreement has pushed Obama into a situation in which he must distinguish between the security interests of the United States and those of Israel, and clarify that they are not necessarily the same. ‘As president of the United States it would be an abrogation of my constitutional duty to act against my best judgment simply because it causes temporary friction with a dear friend and ally,’ he said, and thus delivered a clear message: Netanyahu crossed red lines in his battle against the Iran deal, when he grossly intervened in domestic American politics and tried to present himself as someone who knows America’s interests better than the president of the United States.

“The wild applause from the audience following that sentence was just a small example of the serious problem Israel finds itself in; the alienation that entire populations in the United States feel for its government’s policies and their feeling that with regard to the nuclear deal with Iran they’re a tail that’s trying to wag the dog.”

The backlash against our Israel-centric foreign policy has been a long time coming, and that it is now being given expression by the President of the United States is significant beyond measure. The Lobby recognizes this fact, which is why they’re spending many millions, and calling in all their chits, in an all-out effort to defeat the Iran deal.

On the other hand, all too many on my side of the barricades fail to recognize the importance of this speech and what it represents. Writing in *The Intercept*, Glenn Greenwald, normally an astute observer, gloms on to irrelevant boilerplate in the speech, and complains that the President finds it necessary to boast about how many times he’s launched his bombers. This peevish liberal moralism misses the point entirely, which is that an historic shift is taking place before our eyes, one that diverts us from the path of perpetual war and puts us on the road to being a normal nation. Braving considerable pushback from his own party, as well as from the Israeli-subservient GOP, this President has single-handedly managed to turn the enormously cumbersome ship of state completely around – no easy task under the best of circumstances. For this he deserves better than tepid applause from Greenwald.

Micah Zenko, writing over at the Council on Foreign Relations blog, takes a different tack: he describes Obama’s contention that it’s either a deal or war, averring that this posits that the Iranians, facing the collapse of the deal, will take the path of weaponizing their nuclear infrastructure and begin to develop a bomb. This assumes far too much, avers Zenko: it’s more likely they’ll adopt a stance of nuclear ambiguity, standing on the threshold of acquiring a bomb without provoking the West into attacking them.

This argument leaves out one crucial factor: America’s War party, which has been trying to gin up a military conflict with Iran ever since the latter days of the George W. Bush administration. It also leaves out history: after all, the Iraqis never did have those “weapons of mass destruction,” and yet the US convinced the world (except a few dissidents, including yours truly)

that Saddam was actively pursuing nukes, if he didn't already have them secreted away under one of his palaces. Recognizing the degree of influence the Israelis and their lobby exercise over American politics, in the event the deal collapsed the Iranians would have every reason to resort to building a nuclear arsenal in self defense. We can't predict what the Iranians will do, says Zenko: but surely, given our record, they will have more success in predicting *our* future actions. Zenko is wrong: Obama is right – it's the deal, or war.

The bottom line of all this is: if the deal goes through Congress unscathed, the Cheney coup will have been defeated. Our Israel-centric policy of fighting wars on Israel's behalf will be over: the tail will no longer be wagging the dog. Once we defeat the Israeli-directed attempt to derail the deal in Congress we can safely go out into the streets declaiming: *Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we're free at last!*