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War Without End

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Foreigners must frequently look at the United States and shake their heads, wondering how such a great nation could have sunk so low due to a disproportionate and essentially misguided response to a terrorist attack eight years ago. The attackers who carried out 9/11 succeeded through a lot of luck and a mixture of complacency and incompetence on the part of America's intelligence and law enforcement agencies. Terrorism did not threaten our form of government or our way of life then and does not do so now. An assessment by France's highly regarded Paris Institute of Political Studies last week suggested that Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda has likely been reduced to a core group of eight to ten terrorists who are on the run more often than not.

The report from Paris should be regarded as good news, enabling Washington to close the book on the "global war on terror" saga that has damaged the United States more than it has any adversary. Unfortunately, things do not quite work that way and Washington is in fact expanding its anti-terrorism Crusade with a military incursion into Somalia even as it continues to be bogged down in a war that it is losing in Afghanistan. The Afghan war is being fought precisely to eliminate bin Laden even though General Stanley McChrystal indicated last week that there is currently no al-Qaeda presence in the country. McChrystal's comment came on the anniversary of 9/11, a day President Obama commemorated by vowing that "we" would never stop pursuing al-Qaeda. Indeed, 9/11 seems to be an event that triggers flights of fancy. One of Georgetown University's always quotable terrorism experts Bruce Hoffman also celebrated the anniversary by intoning that "if we withdrew from Afghanistan there would be a massive attack against the United States. Unlike the Vietnam war, where the Vietcong were not going to pursue us back to the US if we left Indochina, this is different. They will pursue us." Sure Bruce, gotcha. The fact is that the war in Afghanistan really has nothing to do with the improbable prospect of groups of men in beards abandoning their caves and rushing to hop on board 747s to take the fight to the Great Satan. Afghanistan is a major policy failure that has morphed into a massive exercise in counter-insurgency and nation building that threatens to continue for years to come if the generals have their way.

And before Afghanistan there was Iraq. Neocons who had taken charge of policy in the Pentagon and White House of George W. Bush intended to attack Iraq almost from the day they entered into office, a war of choice against a weak enemy that posed no threat to the United States. 9/11 did not lead to the invasion and occupation of Iraq, it only provided an excuse. Six and a half years later 130,000 Americans are still in Mesopotamia and nearly every day more soldiers die. Together, Iraq and Afghanistan constitute wars that America can no longer afford in support of misguided policies and against threats that no longer have any meaning, if they ever did.

It would seem to clear to most Americans that the last thing our country needs is another war, but there are plenty of politicians, media talking heads, and think tank "experts" who believe quite the contrary. Iran would be the target of choice. Last week, even as the Obama Administration was signaling its intent to persevere with talks with Tehran, there were other voices suggesting that negotiation is not the way to go. The *New York Times* featured a story claiming that unnamed US intelligence officials think "that Iran has created enough nuclear fuel to make a rapid, if risky, sprint for a nuclear weapon." On the same day, in the *Wall Street Journal* there was an op-ed by former Senators Charles Robb and Daniel Coats joined by retired four-star Air Force General Chuck Wald asserting that Iran "will be able to manufacture enough highly enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon in 2010." The op-ed called on the Obama Administration "to begin preparations for the use of military options" against Tehran. William Cohen, Bill Clinton's Defense Secretary who now heads a consulting group, warns that the window is closing on negotiations with Iran. Sources in the intelligence community suggest that the story, op-ed, and Cohen's alarmist comments, are deliberate disinformation and spin contrived to scare the public. The only comprehensive US intelligence community assessment of the Iranian nuclear program maintains that Iran is at least four years away from having a weapon even if it makes the decision to move ahead with the program, which it has not yet done.

Congressman Howard L. Berman of California, who is unfortunately the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, is also on board the Bash the Mullahs bandwagon. He celebrated September 10th by addressing the National Jewish Leadership Advocacy Day on Iran. Berman called for "...stopping Iran from achieving its nuclear ambition. The Iranian nuclear issue is at the forefront of my policy agenda." He favors a draconian sanctions regime, "I intend to do my best to make sure that those consequences are serious and have a real impact. I will urge the Administration to pursue the strongest and the most effective sanctions measures possible... I intend to take action on my bill — HR 2194, the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act — expeditiously and at the most opportune time to accomplish our shared goal, if Iran does not reverse course. Absent some compelling evidence as to why I should do otherwise, I will mark up my bill next month and begin the process of tightening the screws on Tehran."

"Tightening the screws," indeed. Most would consider a military blockade prohibiting imports of a vital commodity an act of war, which is precisely what Berman and his Florida Republican alter ego Ileana Ros-Lehtinen intend. Presumably voters in California and Florida understand what they are getting when they vote for Berman and Ros-Lehtinen, but do they know that they are opening the door to yet another war? Consider for a moment what the two congressmen and the many others of a like in the House and Senate are saying. They believe that Iran, a developing country with a military budget amounting to only one per cent of what is being spent by Washington, threatens the United States. How exactly? Because it has a program to develop nuclear energy to generate electricity which it is legally entitled to

have, that they believe to be a cover for a weapons program even though there is absolutely no evidence that that is the case. The nuclear program is inspected by the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency and Iran is a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. US intelligence can find no evidence to suggest that Iran has a weapons program. But per Berman and Ros-Lehtinen, Iran must be punished nevertheless, punishment that will, if anything, impel it to develop a nuclear weapon to protect itself. Iran finds itself in an unwinnable position where it must prove a negative to satisfy US lawmakers who are intent on going to war come hell or high water. The hubris that drives American policymakers has already led to disaster in Iraq and Afghanistan. Let us hope that something will derail the plans of Berman and Ros-Lehtinen before they can involve the US in a new and disastrous enterprise.