

Editorial

Genocide Old and New

The mid-term Congressional Elections in the United States gave a clear majority to the Democrats in the House of Representatives. They even gave the Democrats a narrow victory in the Election for the Senate. Of course, the Democrats reflect a variety of views on the war in Iraq: but whatever their own views, it was quite impossible to see their triumph as anything rather than a repudiation of the policies of President George W. Bush. As if to confirm this judgement, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld instantly resigned. He was replaced by Robert Gates, a close intimate of the present President's father, President George H. W. Bush. His foreign policy team diverged in many respects from the current President's policy.

Mr. Gates was already a member of the Iraq Study Group, which was led by a colleague of his, James Baker, former Secretary of State. It involved a number of leading old-school Republicans and senior Democrats. It was widely expected that the ISG would ultimately argue for direct talks between the United States and Iran, as the other preponderant influence over events in Iraq. If clues were sought about the outcome of this report, it would be hard to find them in the statements of the British Prime Minister. Certainly he was voluble as ever after the defeat of his American allies. But he still proclaimed the need for co-operation in their efforts in shrill and peremptory tones, clothing his peace initiative towards Iran and Syria (if such it was) in the language of near-hysterical denunciation.

Of course, the neo-cons, both in their American and British incarnations, have boxed themselves into an impossibly uncomfortable corner. They insist that the Iranians furnish a core component of the axis of evil, whilst at the same time proclaiming, with no evidence whatever, that they are simultaneously hell-bent on the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

It is very difficult to maintain these views with the requisite degree of stridency whilst calling upon your adversaries to initiate a major new peace initiative. All the time, in the background, is the insistent report of military preparations. Colonel Gardiner, who had been commissioned to identify Iranian installations for targeting for possible bombardment, made a blunt report of his activities shortly before the mid-term Elections.¹

For some years there had been concern about the confrontation between the United States and Iran. This has continuously given rise to apprehension, as leaks from the American Intelligence Services, and the notable dispatches of Seymour Hersh, have raised alarm from time to time.

But there have been other voices which, without being sanguine, have been somewhat more reassuring. Discounting the apologists for the American administration, there have been serious voices from the United States Intelligence, and the American military, explaining why the military and social costs of an extension of the Middle East war to Iran would be prohibitive, wreaking far more damage on American interests than it would be rational to risk. This view has not usually been founded on any moral rejection of the awful consequences of war,

but on calculations of its likely consequences.

Quite generally this nowadays excludes the possibility of any ground offensive. What has been a more open question has been whether the United States might launch air attacks.

The remarkable story of the offensive against Lebanon, which suffered prolonged Israeli bombardment and immense destruction, and yet remained undefeated, would have given serious thought to military planners in the United States. It certainly seems that the opposition of the British and American Governments to an immediate ceasefire in Lebanon was based on the calculation that, given sufficient time, the Israelis would be able to destroy Hezbollah, even if this process involved the most widespread material destruction, and very large numbers of civilian casualties. But Hezbollah was not crushed, and indeed, according to its leader Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, it emerged from that terrible conflict stronger in popular support, and indeed, even in a stronger military position than it held at the beginning.

But there have been insistent noises from the Bush entourage, not only accusing Hezbollah of being proxies for Iran, but also threatening to visit a similar destruction upon Iran from the air, like that which has afflicted the Lebanon. As sometimes happens, events that might provide an awesome deterrent to rational people may sometimes be an incentive to military adventurism.

At this point we received the report from Sam Gardiner. He thinks that the consequences of a serious air strike on Iran can be incalculable. But he thinks that whereas military rationality might have prevailed heretofore, today the issue is perilously more uncertain.

His conclusion is very chilling. Just prior to any anticipated strike, he says we can expect the quiet deployment of Air Force tankers to staging bases, and 'we will see additional Navy assets moved to the region'. There will also be a fierce intensification of the propagandist preparations for war on terrorism.

All of us are well aware of some of the recent propagandist moves in this direction. Now, more ominously, a significant 'Strike Group' of ships has arrived in the Persian Gulf. On September 21st it was reported in *The Nation* that:

'the Eisenhower Strike Group bristling with Tomahawk cruise missiles, has received orders to depart the United States in a little over a week ... other official sources ... confirm that this armada is scheduled to arrive off the coast of Iran on or around October 21st.'

Even after the Elections, Seymour Hersh reiterated his views that the White House feared that the victorious Democrats might prohibit the financing of operations aimed at overthrowing or destabilising the Iranian Government, to prevent it from acquiring the bomb.

'They are afraid that Congress is going to vote a binding resolution to stop a hit on Iran, à la Nicaragua in the Contra war.'

Hersh recalled that in late 1982 Edward P. Boland, a Democrat, introduced the first of his amendments which restricted the Reagan administration's ability to

support the Contras, who were actively seeking the overthrow of the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua. This led directly to the White House initiating the clandestine sale of American weaponry, via Israel, to Iran, in order to raise covert funds for onward transmission to the Contras in Nicaragua. All this, said Hersh, was recollected by Vice President Cheney shortly before the mid-term Elections, when he claimed in a conversation (of which he now says he has no record) that whatever Congress under new management might say, the Bush administration would be able to find ways to circumvent it. So we came to hear a new mantra: ‘We are not looking for an exit strategy. We are looking for victory.’

So it comes about that the alliance recruits a powerful new task force of Leprechauns, and all stride forth armed with shovels, to the end of the rainbow where victory is to be found in a pot of gold. Or maybe not ...

But for now, we must continue to try to decode the barrage of contradictory messages which come from officialdom. Perhaps the most interesting of these is to be found in the report of the Task Force established by the Council on Foreign Relations, under the co-chairmanship of the same Robert M. Gates, and President Carter’s former adviser, Zbig Brzezinski. This has the encouraging title: *Iran: Time for a New Approach*.²

Their Task Force reasserts the uncertainty of its members about the precise nature of the Iranian Government’s policy on the development of nuclear weapons. But,

‘at the core of the Task Force’s conclusions is the recognition that it is in the interests of the United States to engage selectively with Iran to promote regional stability, dissuade Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons, preserve reliable energy supplies, reduce the threat of terror, and address the “democracy deficit” that pervades the Middle East as a whole. For these reasons, the members advocate a revised strategic approach to Iran.

A Revised Approach to Iran

The Task Force concludes that the current lack of sustained engagement with Iran harms US interests in a critical region of the world and that direct dialogue with Tehran on specific areas of mutual concern should be pursued.

1. A political dialogue with Iran should not be deferred until such a time as the deep differences over Iranian nuclear ambitions and its invidious involvement with regional conflicts have been resolved. Rather, the process of selective political engagement itself represents a potentially effective path for addressing those differences. Just as the United States maintains a constructive relationship with China (and earlier did so with the Soviet Union) while strongly opposing certain aspects of its internal and international policies, Washington should approach Iran with a readiness to explore areas of common interests, while continuing to contest objectionable policies. Ultimately, any real rapprochement with Tehran can only occur in the context of meaningful progress on the most urgent US concerns surrounding nuclear weapons, terrorism, and regional stability.

2. A “grand bargain” that would settle comprehensively the outstanding conflicts between Iran and the United States is not a realistic goal, and pursuing such an outcome would be unlikely to produce near-term progress on Washington’s central interests. Instead, the Task Force proposes selectively engaging Iran on issues where US and Iranian interests converge, and building upon incremental progress to tackle the broader range of concerns that divide the two governments.

3. US policies towards Tehran should make use of incentives as well as punitive measures. The US reliance on comprehensive, unilateral sanctions has not succeeded in its stated objective to alter Iranian conduct and has deprived Washington of greater leverage vis-à-vis the Iranian government apart from the threat of force. Given the increasingly important role of economic interests in shaping Iran's policy options at home and abroad, the prospect of commercial relations with the United States could be a powerful tool in Washington's arsenal.

4. The United States should advocate democracy in Iran without relying on the rhetoric of regime change, as that would be likely to arouse nationalist sentiments in defense of the current regime even among those who currently oppose it. The US government should focus its rhetoric and its policies on promoting political evolution that encourages Iran to develop stronger democratic institutions at home and enhanced diplomatic and economic relations abroad. Engaging with the current government to address pressing regional and international issues need not contradict US support for these objectives; indeed, engagement pursued judiciously would enhance the chances of internal change in Iran.

5. The Task Force is mindful of repeated efforts over the last twenty-five years to engage the regime in Tehran, and that all of these have come to naught for various reasons. However, the Task Force believes that the US military intervention along Iran's flanks in both Afghanistan and Iraq has changed the geopolitical landscape in the region. These changes may offer both the United States and Iran new incentives to open a mutually beneficial dialogue, first on issues of common interest, such as regional stability, and eventually on the tough issues of terrorism and proliferation. We recognize that even the most perspicacious policy toward Iran may be stymied by Iranian obstinacy.⁷

Apparently we live in an age in which the world's major megapower has evolved not one but a plurality of foreign policies, alongside their military concomitants. At such a time it is more than ever urgent that the task of watching over these sombre developments be undertaken by a large and resourceful peace movement. It is also more important than ever that the peoples of the world should resist the concentration of far more fearful weapons of mass destruction in the hands of such unstable, indeed volatile powers.

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When last the Polaris nuclear system was upgraded in Britain, the decision was virtually clandestine. Although it was to prove most costly, when the true story was revealed under the Thatcher administration, it caused an unholy row in the Labour Party, which, at the end of the seventies, had been told nothing, or nearly nothing, about it. Now John Reid has tried to make a great virtue of what he pretends is 'greater openness'. True, there will be some sort of a vote, about something, in the House of Commons. What exactly it will entail is still, however, shrouded in mystery. What seems clear is that the new Trident programme will be scheduled to continue over several decades, and to involve prodigious continuing expenditure. It seems equally likely that the Government will seek to build in a variety of failsafe mechanisms, to prevent a more humane or rational administration from altering the programme.

Obviously the Americans will have a powerful influence on all this. The wholly subservient ‘British’ deterrent is pretty much the most significant material remnant of the special relationship between Britain and the United States, but the current administration will undoubtedly see it as part of the contract which was accepted when Tony Blair signed up for George Bush’s Iraq war.

There are two snags about confirming the deployment of this renewed programme to create weapons of mass destruction.

Firstly, there will be a Parliamentary vote to give its approval in some form or other. This may not amount to overmuch, but it will at least afford the citizens an opportunity to vote against every one of their representatives who has given support to the new generation of nukes. Within the prevailing state of political alienation, many heads should roll. The big Parties in Parliament may well become smaller, as a result. The small Parties, where conscience may survive, may equally well increase. Few will doubt that this process will be good for British morals, not to say morale. But second, this particular vote may give rise to a qualitatively new constitutional development.

Below we publish statements by two most distinguished Church leaders in Scotland. Both are firmly opposed to the new Trident programme, which impacts with especial force on Scotland.

The so-called British deterrent is now situated solely in Scotland, and the weapons which were formerly deployed in England have all been dismantled since the late years of the last century. Scots are increasingly aware of the dangers involved in the nuclear facilities at Faslane. The clones will heartily insist that the Scottish deployment of weapons of mass destruction is a direct response to the defence needs of the United Kingdom. But the electorate may take a dim view of this commitment, since it offers no benefits to Scotland. Indeed, there could be few more telling arguments in favour of Scottish independence than this: that it offers the most secure road to Scottish disengagement from Mr. Blair’s poisonous wars, and from his illegal weapons. Mr. Blair’s shrill nuclear patriotism may bring about the implosion of more than the allegedly British WMD. It might also terminate the United Kingdom, and thus the Labour Party. If Scotland secedes, then unless something very radical in the English polity develops, very quickly, the conservative instincts of the English will determine the composition of the English Parliament.

All in all, the temptation of nuclear defence could quite possibly remove that which was supposed to be defended. Will anybody think of this in time?

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We are honoured once again to be able to publish the incomparable Robert Fisk in this number of *The Spokesman*.

‘The First Holocaust’ is a chapter from his book on *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East*. This represents a vast labour, and, he tells us, was sixteen years in the making. It has consumed 1,368 pages, and

earned great praises on all sides. Its literary quality needs no commendation from us. But why have we chosen a chapter on the Armenian genocide to represent this great book here, when it is also alive with reports of contemporary traumas, in Afghanistan or Lebanon, Iraq, Iran or Algeria?

There have been, in short, innumerable cruelties in the conquest of the Middle East, but in one sense the most shocking thing about these often criminal acts is that the screams of their victims have so frequently gone unheard. The great warriors who have sought to impose their own mean civilisation on peoples whose culture is as old as time, have also imposed selective hearing, discriminate memory. A celebration of happy indifference.

Fisk has unerringly homed in on the Armenian massacres as a classic symbol of these responses. With his help, we can try to count the dead. But far more significantly, we can begin to understand the vital necessity of memory in defending the humanity of its victims. Because of its length, we have divided this piece into two parts, the first of which appears below. The second will follow.

Ken Coates

Footnote:

1. *The End of the 'Summer of Diplomacy': Assessing US Military Options in Iran*, Sam Gardiner, USAF (Ret.), The Century Foundation, September 2006.
2. *Iran: Time for a New Approach*, Report of an Independent Task Force sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations. Zbigniew Brzezinski and Robert M. Gates, Co-Chairs, Suzanne Maloney, Project Director, July 2004.

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London, South East & East Anglia

**A nuclear free future
is an ethical foreign policy**

**No to
Trident renewal!**

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