

# Obama's Super-Bowl Fumble on Iran

**Exclusive:** In a televised interview before the Super Bowl, President Obama had the chance to send a clear signal to Israel not to launch a preemptive war against Iran but instead offered ambiguous remarks that Israeli hard-liners might read as a partial green light, reports ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Before President Barack Obama's interview with NBC's Matt Lauer, aired before the Super Bowl on Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu probably hoped that, if Obama discussed Iran, he would give him the strong backing that Israeli leaders crave, freeing them to lash out at Iran, militarily, if they so choose.

Few could have been more keenly interested than he in what the President would say in an interview beamed to a hundred million American TV viewers. The problem was that Netanyahu could not have been completely sure of what to expect, given the confusing mixed signals coming out of Washington in the past several weeks.

Some of those signals had been disquieting to Netanyahu and other Israeli hard-liners, for example, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta saying flat-out on Jan. 8 that Iran is NOT "trying to develop a nuclear weapon" undercutting the key casus belli for war and Joint Chiefs Chairman Martin Dempsey visiting Israel on Jan. 19, reportedly to repeat that in person and warn his hosts against provoking war with Iran.

In Netanyahu's world, though, functionaries like Panetta and Dempsey are to be listened to politely but not taken all that seriously. It is what the American President says, **in public**, that may require more attention, and that is enhanced when he has the eyes and ears of multiple millions of super-prime-time viewers.

For Obama's part, he was walking a political tightrope, having sent out two of his top national security aides to signal Israel that he doesn't want a new war in the Middle East, but not wanting to give his hawkish Republican rivals new reasons to question his support for Israel.

Obama is reportedly hopeful that a peaceful settlement can still be reached over Iran's nuclear program, but he understands that he has little margin for error in this high-wire act of political diplomacy especially with so many crosswinds in an election year.

So, President Obama decided to forgo his best chance to inject a loud, unmistakable note of caution into recent warmongering over Iran, not only in

Israel but also among influential neocons in the United States who have been jumping up and down, demanding another preemptive war over hypothetical WMDs, much as they did with Iraq.

When the interview was over, Netanyahu could breathe a sigh of relief. With Obama's words and body language, there was nothing that would constitute a red light and some things that Netanyahu might interpret hopefully as nearly a green light.

### **Heightened Danger**

Bottom Line: The way the President chose to handle Lauer's leading questions on Israel-Iran tensions has brought the world closer to hostilities that would deeply destabilize not only that region but the world economy.

Lauer: [Regard] building tension between Israel and Iran: It seems now the Israelis are signaling they may act, and conduct a strike inside Iran at their nuclear sites sooner than later. Do they have your full support for that raid?

Obama: I don't think Israel has made a decision on what they need to do. I think they, like us, believe that Iran has to stand down on **its nuclear weapons program**, and we have mobilized the international community in a way that is unprecedented. And they [the Iranians] are feeling the pinch, they are feeling the pressure.

**But they have not taken the steps they need to take diplomatically; which is [for the Iranians] to say, "We will pursue peaceful nuclear power; we will not pursue a nuclear weapon."** Until they do so, I think Israel, rightly, is going to be very concerned, and we are as well.

Lauer: Has Israel promised you that they would give you advance warning to any such attack? Should they give you that warning?

Obama: I won't go into the details. I will say that we have closer military and intelligence consultation between our two countries than we've ever had. And we are going to make sure we work in lockstep, as we proceed to try to solve this, hopefully diplomatically.

Our preferred solution here is diplomatic; we're going to keep on pushing on that front. But we're not going to take any options off the table, and I've been very clear that we're going to do everything we can to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon and creating an arms race, a nuclear arms race in a volatile region.

### **Delicate Positioning**

Though the various elements of Obama's delicate positioning are there such as his desire for a diplomatic solution to the crisis and his hope to avoid another war there were also problematic references that reinforced the case for a preemptive Israeli strike, such as the President's bizarre assertion that Iran must declare that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only when that is exactly what Iran has been saying for years.

So, did Obama fumble or intentionally drop the ball? I think the latter, but it hardly matters. The consequences are pretty much the same either way.

The Israelis could not have been sure that Obama would decide to regurgitate their prevarication about Tehran's notional nukes and contradict what his own Defense Secretary had said just four weeks ago, but that is what the President did.

What probably exceeded the Israeli leadership's fondest expectations, though, was Obama's pledge that in addressing Iran's alleged nuclear ambitions, the U.S. will "work in lockstep" with Israel.

("Lockstep?" What does Webster's say of "lockstep?")

*noun:*

1 a mode of marching in step by a body of men going one after another as closely as possible;

2 a standard method or procedure that is mindlessly adhered to

*adjective:*

in perfect, rigid, often mindless conformity or unison.)

Obama poured icing on Israel's cake when he emphasized that Israeli-U.S. military and intelligence consultation has never been closer. The result? Up in smoke went any possibility of plausible denial of foreknowledge on Washington's part, if, despite Panetta's oft-repeated pleas that Israel and the U.S. must "work together", Israel follows its customary practice of shunning any advance warning (much less requests for permission), in favor of seeking post-hoc forgiveness for launching armed attacks.

### **Carte Blanche for Israel?**

For those of us who thought that the White House, recognizing the stakes involved and the benefit of keeping some space between Washington and Tel Aviv, had been trying to restrain the Israelis from attacking Iran, it is hard to fathom why Obama took the line he did.

His words were less surprising to those who have long since concluded that in the coming months he will choose to act out of a felt need to be at least in as much in “lockstep” with Israel as any Republican contender, never mind the risk of giving Netanyahu the impression that there are few if any restraints on what Israel might do to Iran.

It’s also possible that Obama has concluded that there isn’t much he can do to restrain Netanyahu who has strong reason to believe that whatever the President of the United States may want doesn’t really matter when the Congress and much of the Fawning Corporate Media are already in lockstep behind whatever Israel does.

Think back on when Netanyahu gave Obama a public tongue-lashing in the Oval Office and then went to Capitol Hill to receive a hero’s welcome from Republicans and Democrats who engaged in a bipartisan competition to see who could jump to their feet the fastest and applaud the loudest.

Whatever school of thought you may favor regarding Obama’s Iran “strategy,” let me suggest that you put yourself in Netanyahu’s shoes as he watches the pre-game interview. Do you agree that he is likely to come away with the idea that Obama has just applied a fresh coat of high-gloss paint to the box into which the Israelis and their supporters believe they have painted him?

Four months ago, I wrote an article entitled “Israel’s Window to Bomb Iran,” as the war-drumming on Iran began its crescendo. What has happened since has reinforced my assessment that:

“The key factor in any Israeli decision to send its aircraft and missiles to Iran is the degree to which Netanyahu and other hard-line Likud leaders believe that President Obama is locked into giving blanket support to Israel, particularly as Election 2012 draws near.

“The Israelis might well conclude that the formidable effectiveness of the Likud Lobby and kneejerk support of the U.S. Congress as well as still powerful neoconservatives in the Executive Branch (and on the opinion pages of major American newspapers) amount to solid assurance of automatic support for pretty much anything Israel decides to do.

“If Israel translates this into a green light to attack Iran, the rest of the world, even Washington, may get little or no warning.”

We need to add two important new factors since then:

1- Somehow the main focus has shifted from (a) how soon Iran could get a nuclear weapon to (b) how soon Israel is likely to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities,

whether they are shown to be related to nuclear weapons development, or not.

2- The evolving discourse in the Fawning Corporate Media (FCM) has accustomed many Americans to assume that the Israelis would be within their rights to start a war on a convenient "IF", i.e., IF the Iranians are working on a nuclear weapon. Never mind that Defense Secretary Panetta stated publicly just four weeks ago that they are NOT.

Of course, Panetta was simply reiterating the consensus conclusion of the 16 U.S. intelligence agencies that declared in 2007 that Iran had halted work on a nuclear weapon in 2003 and that it did not appear that such work had resumed. And even if you don't want to believe the U.S. intelligence community and Panetta, there was the recent acknowledgement by Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak that the Mossad apparently has concluded the same thing.

Barak gave the interview on Jan. 18, the day before JCS Chairman Martin Dempsey arrived for talks in Israel:

**Question:** Is it Israel's judgment that Iran has not yet decided to turn its nuclear potential into weapons of mass destruction?

**Barak:** confusion stems from the fact that people ask whether Iran is determined to break out from the control [inspection] regime right now in an attempt to obtain nuclear weapons or an operable installation as quickly as possible. Apparently that is not the case.

**Question:** How long will it take from the moment Iran decides to turn it into effective weapons until it has nuclear warheads?

**Barak:** I don't know; one has to estimate. Some say a year, others say 18 months. It doesn't really matter. To do that, Iran would have to announce it is leaving the [UN International Atomic Energy Agency] inspection regime and stop responding to IAEA's criticism, etc.

Why haven't they [the Iranians] done that? Because they realize that when it became clear to everyone that Iran was trying to acquire nuclear weapons, this would constitute definite proof that time is actually running out. This could generate either harsher sanctions or other action against them. They do not want that.

[For more details, see Consortiumnews.com's ["U.S./Israel: Iran NOT Building Nukes."](#)]

Yet, in the United States, the FCM's constant repetition that Iran is working on a nuclear weapon despite the intelligence consensus that Iran is NOT doing so

has created widespread acceptance for an Israeli preemptive war. In many circles, the idea is almost greeted with a yawn, with another yawn given to the notion that “of course” the U.S. would have to march “in lockstep” with Israel, if it got into a war.

A few days ago, I was given eight full TV minutes on RT to discuss whether it is a good idea to start wars in the subjunctive mood, and what I believe are Israel’s true aims vis-À-vis Iran. In my view, the principal aim, pure and simple, is regime change in Tehran, not the destruction of Iran’s notional nukes.

Remember, there have been U.N. inspectors crawling all over Iran, which has yet to be shown to be in violation of the basic Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which Iran has signed and Israel has not. (Another relevant fact that is typically left out of FCM articles about the theoretical possibility of Iran building one nuke is that Israel has a sophisticated and undeclared arsenal of some 300 nukes.)

Is it conceivable that this kind of information has been kept from President Obama?

**Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He served for 30 years as an Army officer and a CIA intelligence analyst and now serves on the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity.**

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## Who’s Wrong in ‘War on Catholics’?

**Exclusive:** GOP presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich claims President Obama has declared “war on the Catholic Church” with a ruling that contraception must be included in health plans for employees of church-led institutions, but Catholic moral theologian Daniel C. Maguire says it is the U.S. bishops (and Gingrich) who are wrong.

By Daniel C. Maguire

The decision of the Obama administration to ensure health care coverage including contraception in Catholic institutions has enraged American bishops who lobbied hard against it. The bishops claim their religious freedom is violated by this ruling, but the bishops are wrong and out of the mainstream of Catholic teaching, including the teaching of bishops in other parts of the

Catholic world.

A number of bishops, including Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg, South Africa, have spoken strongly on the need for condoms, especially in areas ravaged by sexually transmitted diseases. The U.S. bishops are even at odds with the pope who approves the use of condoms "where the intention is to reduce the risk of infection."

The papal change on condoms effectively ended the taboo on condoms since it says that health concerns may require their use, and there are many health concerns aside from HIV/AIDS. The nonpartisan and well-respected Institute of Medicine, on which the Obama administration relied, says contraceptives can be used to treat reduce the risk of endometrial cancer and pelvic inflammatory disease and other diseases mainly affecting women.

Also use of contraception is linked to the decline in infant death. Obviously contraception limits the number of abortions since it prevents unwanted pregnancies.

But the American bishops say the administration's decision on Jan. 20 was a case of religious freedom. In that, they are right but not in the way they intend it. The bishops are claiming the religious freedom to violate the religious freedom of those who are employed in their institutions or who are served in their tax-supported hospitals. By denying contraception as part of employee health plans, what the bishops seek is more like religious fascism than religious freedom.

Furthermore, traditional Catholic teaching rests on a tripod, including the hierarchy, the theologians and the *sensus fidelium*, the experience-fed wisdom of the laity. These three sources of teaching are, as Cardinal Avery Dulles said, "complementary and mutually corrective." An accurate look at Catholic teaching on contraception today shows strong support for the position that contraception is not only permissible but even mandatory in many cases.

Catholic theologians overwhelmingly support contraception. Dozens of Catholic hospitals and universities cover prescribed contraceptives. Ninety-eight percent of Catholic women have used contraceptives. Only 2 percent of Catholic women use the "rhythm method" of birth control favored by conservative Catholics.

Therefore the decision of the Obama administration, rather than threatening Catholic teaching on contraception, is actually more attuned to actual Catholic teaching than are the American Catholic bishops with their idiosyncratic taboo on contraception.

**Daniel C. Maguire is a Professor of Moral Theology at Marquette University, a Catholic, Jesuit institution in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He is author of *A Moral***

## Behind the Saul Alinsky Smear

In demonizing the long-dead Saul Alinsky, Newt Gingrich is exploiting ignorance about the Chicago community organizer while blowing a dog whistle for some bigots on the Right over the “foreign-sounding” Russian-Jewish name. He’s also got his history wrong, as Bill Moyers and Michael Winship note.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

And now, a word about a good American being demonized, despite being long dead. Saul Alinsky is not around to defend himself, but that hasn’t kept Newt Gingrich from using his name to whip up the froth and frenzy of his followers, whose ignorance of the man is no deterrence to their eagerness, at Gingrich’s behest, to tar and feather him posthumously.

In his speeches, Gingrich pounds away at variations on the theme like the piano player in a cheap Western saloon. He declares, “The centerpiece of this campaign, I believe, is American exceptionalism versus the radicalism of Saul Alinsky,” or, “I believe in the Constitution, I believe in the Federalist Papers. Obama believes in Saul Alinsky and secular European socialist bureaucracy.”

It’s all quite clever and insidious, a classic lesson in how to slander someone who cannot answer from the grave, reminiscent of the tactics Gingrich used in those GOPAC memos back in 1996, when he suggested buzz words and phrases to demonize opponents: corrupt, decay, pathetic, permissive attitude, self-serving, and, of course, radical.

In the case of Saul Alinsky, most of the crowd knows nothing about the target except that they’re supposed to hate him. And why not? There’s the strange foreign name obviously an alien. One of *them*. And a socialist at that. What’s a socialist? Don’t know – but Obama’s one, isn’t he? Barack *Hussein* Obama, Saul Alinsky bingo! Two peas in a pod, and a sinister, subversive pod at that.

But just who was Alinsky, really? Born in 1909, in the ghetto of Chicago’s South Side, he saw the worst of poverty and felt the ethnic prejudices that fester, then blast into violence when people are crowded into tenements and have too little to eat. He came to believe that working people, poor people, put down and stepped upon, had to organize if they were going to clean up the slums, fight

the corruption that exploited them, and get a handhold on the first rung of the ladder up and out.

He became a protégé of labor leader John L. Lewis and took the principles of organizing into the streets, first in his hometown of Chicago, then across the country, showing citizens how to band together and non-violently fight for their rights, then training others to follow in his shoes. Along the way, Alinsky faced down the hatred of establishment politicians, attacks both verbal and physical, and jail time.

He was a gutsy guy. Outspoken, confrontational, profane with a caustic wit, one journalist said he looked like an accountant and talked like a stevedore. He had a flair for the dramatic, once sending a neighborhood to dump its trash on the front step of an alderman who was allowing the garbage to pile up. Or immobilizing city hall, a department store or a stockholders meeting with a flood of demonstrators demanding justice.

One thing Newt has right – Saul Alinsky was a proud, self-professed radical. Just look at the titles of two of his books “Reveille for Radicals” and “Rules for Radicals.” But a communist or socialist he was not. He worked with them on behalf of social justice, just as he worked alongside the Catholic archdiocese in Chicago. When he went to Rochester, NY, to help organize the African-American community there after a fatal race riot, he was first invited by the local Council of Churches. It was conscience they all had in common, not ideology.

As far as his connection with Barack Obama, the president was just a kid in Hawaii when Alinsky died, something you would expect a good historian, as Gingrich claims to be, to know. The two men never met, although when Obama arrived on the South Side of Chicago as a community organizer, some of his grassroots work with the poor was with an Alinsky-affiliated organization.

But that’s how it goes in the fight for basic human rights. Alinsky’s influence crops up all across the spectrum, even in the Tea Party. Get this: according to *The Wall Street Journal*, the conservative holy of holies, the one-time Republican majority leader in the House of Representatives, Dick Armey, whose FreedomWorks organization helps bankroll the Tea Party, gives copies of Alinsky’s “Rules for Radicals” to Tea Party leaders.

Watch out Dick you could be next on Newt’s list, although, curiously, in his fight against the wealthy Mitt Romney, Gingrich himself has stolen a page from Alinsky’s populist playbook. After Romney beat him in the Florida primary, Newt insisted he would continue the fight for the nomination and shouted, “We’re going to have people power defeat money power,” a sentiment that was Saul Alinsky through and through.

Alinsky died, suddenly, in 1972. At the time, he was planning to mount a campaign to organize white, middle-class Americans into a national movement for progressive change, a movement he vowed to take into the halls of Congress and his words – “the boardrooms of the megacorporations.”

Maybe that’s why Newt Gingrich has been slandering Alinsky’s name. Maybe he’s afraid, afraid that the very white folks he’s been rousing to frenzy will discover who Saul Alinsky was a patriot in a long line of patriots, who scorned the malignant narcissism of duplicitous politicians and taught everyday Americans to think for themselves and fight together for a better life. That’s the American way, and any good historian would know it.

**Bill Moyers is managing editor and Michael Winship is senior writer of the new weekly public affairs program, “Moyers & Company,” airing on public television. Check local airtimes or comment at [www.BillMoyers.com](http://www.BillMoyers.com).**

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