

# Democratic Ex-Dove Proposes War on Iran

**Exclusive:** The Democrats' rush to rebrand themselves as super-hawks is perhaps best illustrated by the once-dovish Rep. Alcee Hastings proposing stand-by authorization for the President to attack Iran, reports Nicolas J S Davies.

By Nicolas J S Davies

Rep. Alcee Hastings has sponsored a bill to authorize President Trump to attack Iran. Hastings reintroduced H J Res 10, the "Authorization of Use of Force Against Iran Resolution" on Jan. 3, the first day of the new Congress after President Trump's election.

Hastings's bill has come as a shock to constituents and people who have followed his career as a 13-term Democratic Member of Congress from South Florida. Miami Beach resident Michael Gruener called Hastings's bill, "extraordinarily dangerous," and asked, "Does Hastings even consider to whom he is giving this authorization?"

Fritzie Gaccione, the editor of the South Florida Progressive Bulletin noted that Iran is complying with the 2015 JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) and expressed amazement that Hastings has reintroduced this bill at a moment when the stakes are so high and Trump's intentions so unclear.

"How can Hastings hand this opportunity to Trump?" she asked. "Trump shouldn't be trusted with toy soldiers, let alone the American military."

Speculation by people in South Florida as to why Alcee Hastings has sponsored such a dangerous bill reflect two general themes. One is that he is paying undue attention to the pro-Israel groups who raised 10 percent of his coded campaign contributions for the 2016 election. The other is that, at the age of 80, he seems to be carrying water for the pay-to-play Clinton wing of the Democratic Party as part of some kind of retirement plan.

Alcee Hastings is better known to the public as a federal judge who was impeached for bribery and for a series of ethical lapses as a Congressman than for his legislative record. The 2012 Family Affairs report by the Committee for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington found that Hastings paid his partner, Patricia Williams, \$622,000 to serve as his deputy district director from 2007 to 2010, the largest amount paid to a family member by any Member of Congress in the report.

But Hastings sits in one of the 25 safest Democratic seats in the House and does not seem to have ever faced a serious challenge from a Democratic primary

opponent or a Republican.

Alcee Hastings's voting record on war and peace issues has been about average for a Democrat. He voted against the 2002 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) on Iraq, and his 79 percent lifetime Peace Action score is the highest among current House members from Florida, although Alan Grayson's was higher.

Hastings voted against the bill to approve the JCPOA or nuclear agreement with Iran and first introduced his AUMF bill in 2015. With the approval of the JCPOA and Obama's solid commitment to it, Hastings's bill seemed like a symbolic act that posed little danger – until now.

In the new Republican-led Congress, with the bombastic and unpredictable Donald Trump in the White House, Hastings's bill could actually serve as a blank check for war on Iran, and it is carefully worded to be exactly that. It authorizes the open-ended use of force against Iran with no limits on the scale or duration of the war. The only sense in which the bill meets the requirements of the War Powers Act is that it stipulates that it does so. Otherwise it entirely surrenders Congress's constitutional authority for any decision over war with Iran to the President, requiring only that he report to Congress on the war once every 60 days.

### **Dangerous Myths**

The wording of Hastings's bill perpetuates dangerous myths about the nature of Iran's nuclear program that have been thoroughly investigated and debunked after decades of intense scrutiny by experts, from the U.S. intelligence community to the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA).

As former IAEA director Mohamed ElBaradei explained in his book, *The Age of Deception: Nuclear Diplomacy in Treacherous Times*, the IAEA has never found any real evidence of nuclear weapons research or development in Iran, any more than in Iraq in 2003, the last time such myths were abused to launch our country into a devastating and disastrous war.

In *Manufactured Crisis: the Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare*, investigative journalist Gareth Porter meticulously examined the suspected evidence of nuclear weapons activity in Iran. He explored the reality behind every claim and explained how the deep-seated mistrust in U.S.-Iran relations gave rise to misinterpretations of Iran's scientific research and led Iran to shroud legitimate civilian research in secrecy. This climate of hostility and dangerous worst-case assumptions even led to the assassination of four innocent Iranian scientists by alleged Israeli agents.

The discredited myth of an Iranian “nuclear weapons program” was perpetuated throughout the 2016 election campaign by candidates of both parties, but Hillary Clinton was particularly strident in claiming credit for neutralizing Iran’s imaginary nuclear weapons program.

President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry also reinforced a false narrative that the “dual-track” approach of Obama’s first term, escalating sanctions and threats of war at the same time as holding diplomatic negotiations, “brought Iran to the table.” This was utterly false. Threats and sanctions served only to undermine diplomacy, strengthen hard-liners on both sides and push Iran into building 20,000 centrifuges to supply its civilian nuclear program with enriched uranium, as documented in Trita Parsi’s book, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama’s Diplomacy With Iran*.

A former hostage at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran who rose to be a senior officer on the Iran desk at the State Department told Parsi that the main obstacle to diplomacy with Iran during Obama’s first term was the U.S. refusal to “take ‘Yes’ for an answer.”

When Brazil and Turkey persuaded Iran to accept the terms of an agreement proposed by the U.S. a few months earlier, the U.S. responded by rejecting its own proposal. By then the main U.S. goal was to ratchet up sanctions at the U.N., which this diplomatic success would have undermined.

Trita Parsi explained that this was only one of many ways in which the two tracks of Obama’s “dual-track” approach were hopelessly at odds with each other. Only once Clinton was replaced by John Kerry at the State Department did serious diplomacy displace brinkmanship and ever-rising tensions.

### **Next Target for U.S. Aggression?**

Statements by President Trump have raised hopes for a new detente with Russia. But there is no firm evidence of a genuine rethink of U.S. war policy, an end to serial U.S. aggression or a new U.S. commitment to peace or the rule of international law.

Trump and his advisers may hope that some kind of “deal” with Russia could give them the strategic space to continue America’s war policy on other fronts without Russian interference. But this would only grant Russia a temporary reprieve from U.S. aggression as long as U.S. leaders still view “regime change” or mass destruction as the only acceptable outcomes for countries that challenge U.S. dominance.

Students of history, not least 150 million Russians, will remember that another serial aggressor offered Russia a “deal” like that in 1939, and that Russia’s

complicity with Germany over Poland only set the stage for the total devastation of Poland, Russia and Germany.

One former U.S. official who has consistently warned of the danger of U.S. aggression against Iran is retired General Wesley Clark. In his 2007 memoir, *A Time To Lead*, General Clark explained that his fears were rooted in ideas embraced by hawks in Washington since the end of the Cold War. Clark recalls Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Paul Wolfowitz's response in May 1991 when he congratulated him on his role in the Gulf War.

"We screwed up and left Saddam Hussein in power. The president believes he'll be overthrown by his own people, but I rather doubt it," Wolfowitz complained. "But we did learn one thing that's very important. With the end of the Cold War, we can now use our military with impunity. The Soviets won't come in to block us. And we've got five, maybe 10, years to clean up these old Soviet surrogate regimes like Iraq and Syria before the next superpower emerges to challenge us ... We could have a little more time, but no one really knows."

The view that the end of the Cold War opened the door for a series of U.S.-led wars in the Middle East was widely held among hawkish officials and advisers in the Bush I administration and military-industrial think tanks. During the propaganda push for war on Iraq in 1990, Michael Mandelbaum, the director of East-West studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, crowded to the *New York Times*, "for the first time in 40 years, we can conduct military operations in the Middle East without worrying about triggering World War III."

### **Self-Inflicted Nightmare**

As we begin the fifth U.S. administration since 1990, U.S. foreign policy remains trapped in the self-inflicted nightmare that those dangerous assumptions produced. Today, war-wise Americans can quite easily fill in the unasked questions that Wolfowitz's backward-looking and simplistic analysis failed to ask, let alone answer, in 1991.

What did he mean by "clean up"? What if we couldn't "clean them all up" in the short historical window he described? What if failed efforts to "clean up these old Soviet surrogate regimes" left only chaos, instability and greater dangers in their place? Which leads to the still largely unasked and unanswered question: how can we actually clean up the violence and chaos that we ourselves have now unleashed on the world?

In 2012, Norwegian General Robert Mood was forced to withdraw a U.N. peacekeeping team from Syria after Hillary Clinton, Nicolas Sarkozy, David

Cameron and their Turkish and Arab monarchist allies undermined U.N. envoy Kofi Annan's peace plan.

In 2013, as they unveiled their "Plan B," for Western military intervention in Syria, General Mood told the BBC, "It is fairly easy to use the military tool, because, when you launch the military tool in classical interventions, something will happen and there will be results. The problem is that the results are almost all the time different than the political results you were aiming for when you decided to launch it. So the other position, arguing that it is not the role of the international community, neither coalitions of the willing nor the U.N. Security Council for that matter, to change governments inside a country, is also a position that should be respected."

General Wesley Clark played his own deadly role as the supreme commander of NATO's illegal assault on what was left of the "old Soviet surrogate regime" of Yugoslavia in 1999. Then, ten days after the horrific crimes of September 11, 2001, newly retired General Clark dropped in at the Pentagon to find that the scheme Wolfowitz described to him in 1991 had become the Bush administration's grand strategy to exploit the war psychosis into which it was plunging the country and the world.

Undersecretary Stephen Cambone's notes from a meeting amid the ruins of the Pentagon on September 11th include orders from Secretary Rumsfeld to, "Go massive. Sweep it all up. Things related and not."

A former colleague at the Pentagon showed Clark a list of seven countries besides Afghanistan where the U.S. planned to unleash "regime change" wars in the next five years: Iraq; Syria; Lebanon; Libya; Somalia; Sudan; and Iran. The five- to ten-year window of opportunity Wolfowitz described to Clark in 1991 had already passed. But instead of reevaluating a strategy that was illegal, untested and predictably dangerous to begin with, and now well past its sell-by date, the neocons were hell-bent on launching an ill-conceived *blitzkrieg* across the Middle East and neighboring regions, with no objective analysis of the geopolitical consequences and no concern for the human cost.

### **Misery and Chaos**

Fifteen years later, despite the catastrophic failure of illegal wars that have killed 2 million people and left only misery and chaos in their wake, the leaders of both major U.S. political parties seem determined to pursue this military madness to the bitter end – whatever that end may be and however long the wars may last.

By framing their wars in terms of vague "threats" to America and by demonizing

foreign leaders, our own morally and legally bankrupt leaders and the subservient U.S. corporate media are still trying to obscure the obvious fact that we are the aggressor that has been threatening and attacking country after country in violation of the U.N. Charter and international law since 1999.

So U.S. strategy has inexorably escalated from an unrealistic but limited goal of overthrowing eight relatively defenseless governments in and around the Middle East to risking nuclear war with Russia and/or China. U.S. post-Cold War triumphalism and hopelessly unrealistic military ambitions have revived the danger of World War III that even Paul Wolfowitz celebrated the passing of in 1991.

The U.S. has followed the well-worn path that has stymied aggressors throughout history, as the exceptionalist logic used to justify aggression in the first place demands that we keep doubling down on wars that we have less and less hope of winning, squandering our national resources to spread violence and chaos far and wide across the world.

Russia has demonstrated that it once again has both the military means and the political will to “block” U.S. ambitions, as Wolfowitz put it in 1991. Hence Trump’s vain hopes of a “deal” to buy Russia off. U.S. operations around islands in the South China Sea suggest a gradual escalation of threats and displays of force against China rather than an assault on the Chinese mainland in the near future, although this could quickly spin out of control.

So, more or less by default, Iran has moved back to the top of the U.S.’s “regime change” target list, even though this requires basing a political case for an illegal war on the imaginary danger of non-existent weapons for the second time in 15 years. War against Iran would involve, from the outset, a massive bombing campaign against its military defenses, civilian infrastructure and nuclear facilities, killing tens of thousands of people and likely escalating into an even more catastrophic war than those in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria.

Gareth Porter believes that Trump will avoid war on Iran for the same reasons as Bush and Obama, because it would be unwinnable and because Iran has robust defenses that could inflict significant losses on U.S. warships and bases in the Persian Gulf.

On the other hand, Patrick Cockburn, one of the most experienced Western reporters in the Middle East, believes that we will attack Iran in one to two years because, after Trump fails to resolve any of the crises elsewhere in the region, the pressure of his failures will combine with the logic of escalating demonization and threats already under way in Washington to make war on Iran

inevitable.

In this light, Rep. Hastings's bill is a critical brick in a wall that bipartisan hawks in Washington are building to close off any exit from the path to war with Iran. They believe that Obama let Iran slip out of their trap, and they are determined not to let that happen again.

Another brick in this wall is the recycled myth of Iran as the greatest state sponsor of terrorism. This is a glaring contradiction with the U.S. focus on ISIS as the world's main terrorist threat. The states that have sponsored and fueled the rise of ISIS have been, not Iran, but Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the other Arab monarchies and Turkey, with critical training, weapons and logistical and diplomatic support for what has become ISIS from the U.S., U.K. and France.

Iran can only be a greater state sponsor of terrorism than the U.S. and its allies if Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis, the Middle Eastern resistance movements to whom it provides various levels of support, pose more of a terrorist danger to the rest of the world than ISIS. No U.S. official has even tried to make that case, and it is hard to imagine the tortured reasoning it would involve.

### **Brinkmanship and Military Madness**

The U.N. Charter wisely prohibits the threat as well as the use of force in international relations, because the threat of force so predictably leads to its use. And yet, post-Cold War U.S. doctrine quickly embraced the dangerous idea that U.S. "diplomacy" must be backed up by the threat of force.

Hillary Clinton has been a strong proponent of this idea since the 1990s and has been undeterred by either its illegality or its catastrophic results. As I wrote in an article on Clinton during the election campaign, this is illegal brinkmanship, not legitimate diplomacy.

It takes a lot of sophisticated propaganda to convince even Americans that a war machine that keeps threatening and attacking other countries represents a "commitment to global security," as President Obama claimed in his Nobel speech. Convincing the rest of the world is another matter again, and people in other countries are not so easily brainwashed.

Obama's hugely symbolic election victory and global charm offensive provided cover for continued U.S. aggression for eight more years, but Trump risks giving the game away by discarding the velvet glove and exposing the naked iron fist of U.S. militarism. A U.S. war on Iran could be the final straw.

Cassia Laham is the co-founder of POWIR (People's Opposition to War, Imperialism

and Racism) and part of a coalition organizing demonstrations in South Florida against many of President Trump's policies. Cassia calls Alcee Hastings's AUMF bill, "a dangerous and desperate attempt to challenge the shift in power in the Middle East and the world." She noted that, "Iran has risen up as a pivotal power player countering U.S. and Saudi influence in the region," and concluded, "if the past is any indicator of the future, the end result of a war with Iran will be a large-scale war, high death tolls and the further weakening of U.S. power."

Whatever misconceptions, interests or ambitions have prompted Alcee Hastings to threaten 80 million people in Iran with a blank check for unlimited war, they cannot possibly outweigh the massive loss of life and unimaginable misery for which he will be responsible if Congress should pass H J Res 10 and President Trump should act on it. The bill still has no co-sponsors, so let us hope that it can be quarantined as an isolated case of extreme military madness, before it becomes an epidemic and unleashes yet another catastrophic war.

**Nicolas J S Davies is the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. He also wrote the chapters on "Obama at War" in *Grading the 44th President: a Report Card on Barack Obama's First Term as a Progressive Leader*.**

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