

# Itching for Confrontation with Iran

The neocons along with their allies in Congress and on the Washington Post's op-ed page remain determined to sabotage a diplomatic rapprochement with Iran, demanding that its leaders be confronted, not engaged, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

David Ignatius offers in [his column](#) some thoughts inspired by results of a [Pew Research Center poll](#) in which the headline item is that nearly half of Americans believe the United States "should mind its own business internationally," a finding that the Pew people describe as "one of the highest readings of isolationist sentiment in decades."

In commenting on the issue of Iran's nuclear program, Ignatius notes that completion of a final agreement will require President Barack Obama to secure agreement from Congress and the public, and that it looks now that he will have a tough time securing that support. Ignatius is right insofar as there already is deal-scuppering trouble-making in Congress and likely to be more to come. But then he tries to summarize the public mood by saying, "The public doesn't want war, but it doesn't seem to like entangling diplomacy much, either."

"Entangling diplomacy"? Hold that thought while we move down the *Washington Post* opinion page to the next column, the [one by George Will](#). Will evidently is so taken by Kenneth Pollack's new book on Iran that this is Will's second column in the last two weeks that is based on it.

Will and Pollack are right on two very important propositions about the Iranian nuclear matter. One is that the idea of using military force to deal with it would be, for multiple reasons, a big and even disastrous mistake. The other is that if Iran ever did acquire a nuclear weapon, deterrence would work and the situation that is generally referred to as "containment" is one we can live with. [I have made these same points](#) in my own writing.

The rest of the viewpoint Will is defending involves a giving up of any possibility of reaching further agreements with an Iran whose nuclear program stays peaceful. To be fair to Pollack, and Will is fair enough to mention this, Pollack completed his book before the recent successful negotiation of an interim nuclear agreement with Tehran. But the negative fatalism that is being expressed errs in at least three ways.

One, it goes along with the erroneous tendency to assume that Iranian

policymakers are chomping at the bit to make a nuclear weapon, and that they will not do so only if forced not to do so. This is a misreading of what are ever-more-clear Iranian intentions, in which not only has no decision to build a bomb been made but also the Iranian leadership sees a more normal relationship with the West, and a permanently peaceful nuclear program, as distinctly preferable to having a nuclear weapon. Will's position involves a self-fulfilling worst-case assumption.

Second is an apparent misreading of the obstacles to a comprehensive nuclear agreement. It is true that this is very far from a done deal, but the reason is not because the terms of an agreement that would satisfy both Western and Iranian interests are not fairly clear. Rather, the main obstacle is opposition to *any* U.S.-Iranian agreement from hardliners, especially hardliners outside Iran.

It also is true that this opposition is formidable and is determined to keep doing whatever it can to prevent an agreement, but the opposition is beatable. It is narrow, consisting chiefly of the Israeli government, those in the United States who dance mainly to that government's tune, and assorted neocons who welcome eternal hostility with what they regard as forces of darkness in the Middle East and, unlike Will, would even welcome a war with them.

Pushing against this opposition is a president and his administration who, to their credit, already have shown more drive and moxie on this matter than on almost any other foreign policy issue, or on most domestic issues. Moreover, the narrow opposition does not speak for the American public. This is where Ignatius errs by throwing Congress and the public into the same pot. Opinion polling that has directly addressed the issue of diplomacy to reach a nuclear agreement has shown two-to-one support by the American public for a diplomatic solution. Americans both do not want war *and* they do want a negotiated agreement.

Third, the position Will presents pays inadequate attention to what the negative fatalism means we would be giving up. First and most obviously, we would be giving up the prospect of a Middle East in which Iran does not have a nuclear weapon, a situation which everyone, including Will, Pollack, me, Barack Obama, most Israelis, the Saudis, and even the Iranian leadership, believes would be preferable to a Middle East in which it does have a nuke.

It also means giving up the prospect of ever getting away from the lines of hostility and conflict that have badly constrained U.S. policy in the region. This is where we get back to Ignatius's idea of entangling diplomacy. Except that entanglement is what we have now, in which the United States is entangled in fixed lines of conflict in which it is expected to defer to the wishes of supposed allies, is barred from ever working for mutual benefit with those

labeled forever as adversaries, and is sucked into the narrow agendas and conflicts of the purported allies.

Agreement with Iran on the high-profile nuclear issue would be a step toward disentangling the United States from all that, and toward greater freedom for the United States in using further diplomacy to pursue its own interests, working selectively with different states on different matters as the issues and our own interests may dictate.

**Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a [blog post at The National Interest's Web site](#). Reprinted with author's permission.)**

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## Iraq War Actors Have No Shame

As wretched as the Iraq War was, the absence of any meaningful accountability for the U.S. policymakers and pundits who made the catastrophe happen is nearly as stomach-turning. Every day the same faces show up on the TV talk shows and Op-Ed pages spouting more of their "wisdom," as Adil E. Shamoo notes.

By Adil E. Shamoo

The only message our children will take away from the war in Iraq is that if you repeat a boldfaced lie enough, it will someday become accepted truth. And as a corollary, saving face is much more important than admitting a mistake, no matter how destructive the outcome.

Unfortunately for our children, manipulating the truth became the norm for the Bush administration, which invaded Iraq on what we know now (and the administration almost certainly knew then) were utterly false pretenses.

Thanks to these lies, Americans, including our soldiers and civilians serving in Iraq, were convinced Saddam Hussein was linked to the 9/11 attacks and had weapons of mass destruction, two of the ever-evolving reasons for getting into the war. Many still believe this. Engaging in mass deception in order to justify official policy both degrades and endangers democracy. But by far, it is ordinary Iraqis who have suffered the most.

We know now beyond any doubt that Iraq was not involved in 9/11 and had no weapons of mass destruction. But as Paul Pillar, a former senior CIA analyst

with the Iraqi portfolio, wrote on March 14, "Intelligence did not drive the decision to invade Iraq not by a long shot, despite the aggressive use by the Bush administration of cherry-picked fragments of intelligence reporting in its public sales campaign for the war." Indeed, this was a war in search of a justification from the very beginning, and any little lie would have worked.

It is very fortuitous for all those politicians, policy makers and bureaucrats with Iraqi blood on their hands, Republicans and Democrats both, that the only courtroom they've been shuffled into is the court of public opinion, where most received light sentences. Indeed, the Iraq War boosters are still a fixture on our television screens.

Dan Senor, who served as a spokesman for the U.S occupation authorities and willfully misrepresented events on the ground during that time, is a regular commentator on MSNBC's "Morning Joe," a veritable roundtable of Washington establishment punditry.

Kenneth Pollack, a longtime Brookings fellow and CIA analyst who wrote the 2002 book *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (which is barely mentioned today on the Brookings website), is a familiar face on the commentary circuit and among think tank salons. Ex-Generals David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal, who each left their most recent posts in disgrace, are raking in thousands of dollars for speeches, lectures, and consulting work.

Sure, there are pundits and reporters who admit they wrongly supported the war, but their regrets are usually reserved for their blind faith in the war planners and their own lack of inquisitiveness. For example, *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius confessed in a March 21 column that Iraq was one of "the biggest strategic errors in Modern American history." But the thrust of his own *mea culpa* was that he did not write enough "on the overriding question of whether the war made sense," which would have allowed him to see that the U.S was not strong enough nor flexible enough to succeed.

Rarely do pundits apologize for the horrendous Iraqi losses inflicted by the war: more than a million deaths and millions more wounded with varying lifelong disabilities, including thousands of tortured prisoners, with an estimated 16,000 of them still unaccounted for. Twenty-eight percent of Iraqi children suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, and 2.8 million people are still internally displaced or living as refugees outside the country.

Add to that the complete upheaval of the Iraqi economy, as well as its transportation, education and medical institutions. Don't forget the countless people suffering from trauma and depression, sectarian strife, terrifying birth defects from toxic pollution, and a brain drain that has left the country

illiterate.

Not since the American Civil War has the U.S citizenry had to endure such horrors. Yet discussion of these repercussions is noticeably absent as we still struggle to understand the scope of the Iraq War and what all of its lies have wrought.

Let us start with a sincere apology to the Iraqi people for the crimes the U.S government has committed. A long-range plan for restitution is a second step. Empires decline due to moral decay from within. Ten years after the invasion of Iraq, our nation is looking at the moral abyss. If lies have delivered us to this place, then only the truth will begin our journey back.

**Adil E. Shamoo is an associate fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies, a senior analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus, and the author of *Equal Worth When Humanity Will Have Peace*. He can be reached atashamoo@som.umaryland.edu. This article appeared as:**

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