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- [Hyping Up the Iran 'Threat': Ray McGovern](#)
- [Clueless and Catastrophic: Charley Reese](#)
- [Nuking Safeguarded Facilities: Gordon Prather](#)
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The next war ... may well bury Western civilization forever.

– Aleksandr Solzhenitsy

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August 26, 2006

Hoekstra's Hoax: Hyping Up the Iran 'Threat'

by Ray McGovern

Talk about chutzpah! I was suffering a bit from outrage fatigue yesterday but was shaken out of it as soon as I downloaded an unusually slick paper, "Recognizing Iran as a Strategic Threat: An Intelligence Challenge for the United States," released this week by House intelligence committee chair, Pete Hoekstra.

No, not "Hoaxer." This is serious – very serious. The paper amounts to a pre-emptive strike on what's left of the Intelligence Community, usurping its prerogative to provide policymakers with estimates on front-burner issues – in this case, Iran's weapons of mass destruction and other threats. The Senate had already requested a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran. But Hoekstra is first out of the starting gate. Professional intelligence officers were "as a courtesy" invited to provide input to Hoekstra's report.

While you can't judge a book by its cover, you can glean insight these days from the titles given to National Intelligence Estimates and papers meant to supplant them. Remember "Iraq's Continuing Program for Weapons of Mass Destruction," the infamous NIE of October 1, 2002, by which Congress was misled into approving an unnecessary war? "Continuing" leaped out of the title, foreshadowing the one-sided thrust of an estimate ostensibly commissioned to determine whether WMD programs were "continuing," or whether they had been dead for ten years. (The latter turned out to be the case, but the title – and the cooked insides – provided the scare needed to get Congress aboard.)

Now suddenly appears a pseudo-estimate titled "Recognizing Iran as a Strategic Threat: An Intelligence Challenge for the United States." To wit, the challenge set before the Intelligence Community is to get religion, climb aboard, and "recognize" Iran as a strategic threat. But alas, the community has not yet been fully purged of recalcitrant intelligence analysts who reject a "faith-based" approach to intelligence and hang back from the altar call to revealed truth. Hence, the statutory intelligence agencies cannot be counted on to come to politically correct conclusions

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regarding the strategic threat from Iran.

Hoekstra to the Rescue

Pete Hoekstra apparently has set his sights on outstripping his Senate counterpart, Pat Roberts of Kansas, for first honors as intelligence partisan of the year. Roberts, who has torpedoed all attempts to complete the long-promised study on whether the George W. Bush administration played fast and loose with intelligence on Iraq, is a formidable competitor, but Hoekstra is moving up steadily on the right. Tellingly, his zeal (and that of FOX News) recently found him well ahead of even Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Citing an Army report that units had dug up corroded canisters of chemical agent dating back decades, Hoekstra and Senator Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) insisted that weapons of mass destruction had indeed been found in Iraq. "We were right all the time!"

Shameless as Cheney and Rumsfeld have been in stretching the truth, not even they would go along with that one. No doubt they pledged to find more credible ways to shore up Santorum's flagging campaign to hang onto his Senate seat. One can understand the pressure on Santorum to find some deus ex machina to rescue his campaign. What was most remarkable was his ability to enlist the chair of the House intelligence committee in this charade and make him the laughingstock of Washington. Was Hoekstra unfamiliar with the donnybrook over the administration's fatuous claims of WMD in Iraq, and its eventual concession that there were none there? Where has he been?

As recently as May 4, in answer to a question after a speech in Atlanta, Rumsfeld conceded, "Apparently there were no weapons of mass destruction." Was Hoekstra so naive as to think he could pressure the administration into recanting its painful recantation and risk opening that still festering wound?

Undiminished Zeal

The snub by the administration has not affected Hoekstra's zeal to do its bidding, even if further embarrassment waits in the wings. He has violated all precedent in consenting to have his committee author this faux-National Intelligence Estimate on Iran, making it out to be a strategic threat. But a threat to whom? The answer leaps off the cover. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is pictured giving a Nazi-type salute behind a podium adorned with a wide poster (in English) "The world without Zionism." And atop the first page stands an Ahmadinejad quote: "The annihilation of the Zionist regime will come ... Israel must be wiped off the map ..."

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A Torturous Silence

The authors make a college try to persuade that Iran is also a threat to the US, but is singularly unpersuasive. Like Cheney's major speech of August 26, 2002, which provided the terms of reference and conclusions of the subsequent NIE of October 1, 2002, it merely asserts that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons and probably has offensive chemical and biological weapons programs and "the largest inventory of ballistic missiles in the Middle East." The text then tacks on for good measure Iranian support for terrorist groups and support for the insurgency in Iraq.

The paper gives most space to the nuclear issue (shades of the "mushroom cloud" conjured up before Congress voted to authorize war on Iraq in October 2002). But the best it can do in conjuring up a threat that most see as 5 to 10 years out is that a nuclear-armed Iran might be emboldened to "advance its aggressive ambitions in and outside of the region ... [and] ... threaten US friends and allies." Stretching still further, the authors argue that Iran might think that a nuclear arsenal might protect it from retaliation and thus would be "more likely to use force against US forces and allies in the region." Last, but hardly least: "Israel would find it hard to live with a nuclear armed Iran and could take military action against Iranian nuclear facilities."

Principal Author

The Hoekstra-issued draft bears the fingerprints of one Frederick Fleitz – the principal drafter, according to press reports. Fleitz did his apprenticeship on politicization under John Bolton when the latter was Under Secretary of State, and became his principal aide and chief enforcer while on loan from the CIA. In this light, his behavior in trying to cook intelligence to the recipe of high policy is even more inexcusable. CIA analysts, particularly those on detail to policy departments, have no business playing the enforcer of policy judgments; they have no business conjuring up "intelligence around the policy."

Fleitz must have flunked Ethics and Intelligence Analysis 101. For he is the same official who "explained" to State Department's intelligence analyst Christian Westermann that it was "a political judgment as to how to interpret" data on Cuba's biological weapons program (which existed only in Bolton's mind) and that the intelligence community "should do as we asked."

But Iran Doesn't Need Electricity

The authors include this familiar canard: "Iran's claim that its nuclear program is for electricity production appears doubtful in light of its large oil and natural gas reserves." But back in 1976 – with Gerald Ford president, Dick Cheney his chief of staff, Donald Rumsfeld secretary of defense, and

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Henry Kissinger national security adviser – the Ford administration bought the Shah's argument that Iran needed a nuclear program to meet its future energy requirements.

They persuaded the hesitant president to offer Iran a deal that would have meant at least \$6.4 billion for US corporations like Westinghouse and General Electric, had not the Shah been unceremoniously ousted three years later. The offer included a reprocessing facility for a complete nuclear fuels cycle – essentially the same capability that the US, Israel, and other countries now insist Iran cannot be allowed to acquire. Cheney must have forgotten all this, when he noted early last year that the Iranians are "already sitting on an awful lot of oil and gas. Nobody can figure why they need nuclear as well to generate energy."

The Current Hype on Iran

Hoekstra's release of this paper is another sign pointing in the direction of a US attack on Iran. Tehran is now being blamed not only for inciting Hezbollah but also for sending improvised explosive devices (IEDs) into Iraq to kill or maim US forces. There is yet another, if more subtle, disquieting note about the paper. It bears the earmarks of a rushed job, with very little editorial scrubbing. There are misplaced modifiers, and verbs often do not take enough care to agree in number with their nouns.

One wag suggested that the president may have taken a direct hand in the drafting. My guess is even more troubling. It seems to me possible that the Cheney-Rumsfeld cabal told Hoekstra to get the paper out sooner rather than later, as an aid to Americans in "recognizing Iran as a strategic threat."

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Ray McGovern was a CIA analyst for 27 years – from the John F. Kennedy administration to that of George H. W. Bush