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Thursday, December 21st, 2006

Target Iran: Former UN Weapons Inspector Scott Ritter and Investigative Journalist Seymour Hersh on White House Plans for Regime Change

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The Pentagon has announced plans to move additional warships and strike aircraft into the Persian Gulf region to be within striking range of Iran. We air an in-depth discussion between two of the leading critical voices on the Bush administration's policy in Iran: former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter, author of "Target Iran: The Truth About the White House's Plans for Regime Change", and Seymour Hersh, Pulitzer Prize winning investigative journalist for The New Yorker magazine. [includes rush transcript]

We turn now to the latest on Iran – the New York Times is reporting the United States and Britain will soon move additional warships and strike aircraft into the Persian Gulf region to be within striking range of Iran. Senior U.S. officers told the paper that the increase in naval power should not be viewed as preparations for any offensive strike against Iran. But they acknowledged that the ability to hit Iran would be increased.

The aircraft carrier Eisenhower and its strike group entered the Persian Gulf on Dec. 11. Another aircraft carrier, the Stennis, is expected to depart for the Gulf within the next month. The military said it is also taking steps to prevent Iran from blocking oil shipments from the Gulf.

Well today on Democracy Now we present an in-depth discussion between two figures who have critical of the Bush administration's policy on Iran. Scott Ritter is a former United Nations weapons inspector in Iraq. He recently wrote the book "Target Iran: The Truth About the White House's Plans for Regime Change." Seymour Hersh is a Pulitzer Prize winning investigative journalist for The New Yorker magazine. In October, Scott Ritter and Seymour Hersh held a public conversation in New York about Scott Ritter's new book.

- **Scott Ritter.** Former United Nations weapons inspector in Iraq. His new book is "Target Iran: The Truth About the White House's Plans for Regime Change."
- **Seymour Hersh.** Pulitzer Prize winning investigative

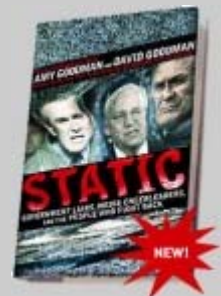
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journalist for The New Yorker magazine.

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AMY GOODMAN: Today on a *Democracy Now!*, we present an in-depth discussion between two figures who have been very critical of the Bush administration's policy on Iran. Scott Ritter is a former United Nations weapons inspector in Iraq. He recently wrote the book, *Target Iran: The Truth About the White House's Plans for Regime Change*. Seymour Hersh is the Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist for the *New Yorker* magazine. In October, Scott Ritter and Seymour Hersh held a public conversation in New York about Scott Ritter's new book. Seymour Hersh began the conversation.

SEYMOUR HERSH: So, Scott, in your book you write at some point -- you list a -- you have an account of some of the things that are going on today inside Iran. You say Israel and the United States were carrying out -- this is on page 147, etc. -- were carrying out a full-court press to try and identify and locate secret nuclear facilities inside Iran. Israel made heavy use of its connections to the Iraqi Kurdistan and to Azerbaijan to set up covert intelligence cells inside Iran, whose work was allegedly supplemented with specially trained commandos entering Iran disguised as local villagers.

The United States was conducting similar operations using Iranian opposition forces, in particular the MEK -- that's the Mujahideen cult, which is a terrorist group, defined by us as an at-one-time anti-Saddam, now anti-Iran group that works very closely still with us, despite its being listed as a terrorist group.

And you describe using opposition forces inside Iran and the MEK to conduct cross-border operations under the supervision of the CIA. The US has also made use of its considerable technical intelligence-collection capabilities, focusing the attention of imagery and electronic eavesdropping satellites, etc., for operating along Iran's periphery. The problem was that neither the Israelis nor the United States could detect any activity whatsoever that could point to a definitive location on the ground where secret nuclear weapons activity was taking place.

A couple of questions. Says who? I haven't read this in the *New York Times*. You don't source it. What's the source? And what do you know? And how do you know this?

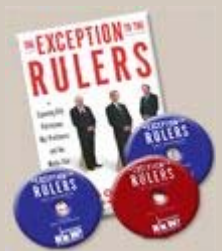
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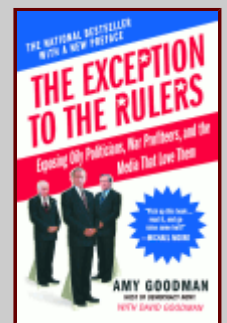
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SCOTT RITTER: Well, as I mentioned in the back, where I talk about sources, most of that information is readily available in the press -- not the American press. You're not going to read about it in the *New York Times*, you're not going to read about it in the *Washington Post*, you probably won't read about it in most mainstream English-language newspapers. But, you know, we used to have an organization in the CIA called FBIS, the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, that would translate the newspapers of the various nations around the world to give you literally a bird's-eye view of what's going on in that country.

So if you read the Azeri press, for instance, you'll find out that the Israeli Mossad has upped its efforts to build a station in Azerbaijan. And the Azeri press will delve into that more. Why does the Mossad want to build a station operating? There's a couple reasons. One, the Mossad is working with the Azeri population. You know, there is a Jewish minority in Azerbaijan that has emigrated to Israel. And so, there's a number of Azeri Israelis that the Israeli government now is bringing back to Azerbaijan to work on this issue. This is spelled out in the Azeri press, so if you want to get some good insights, read the Azeri press. Read the Turkish press. The Turkish press will also talk about what's going on in Iran and Azerbaijan. This will give you the leads.

And then, because I'm not an active in-service intelligence officer anymore, I will take these leads and call friends who are active serving intelligence officers. And while they're not going to divulge classified information, I'll say, "Hey, I read something, where certain activities are taking place. Can you comment on this news?" We'll sit down over some beers, and they'll comment. And then you dig even further. And I'll tell you that I wrote the book before I went to Iran. But when I got to Iran and I talked to Revolutionary Guard commanders, what surprised me is that they knew all this. The Iranians were very cognizant of what was going on in the Azeri section of Iran, in the Kurdish section. They could quote, you know, chapter and verse about what the CIA is up to, what the Israelis are up to.

But, you know, again, the bottom line is, why don't I footnote this? For probably the same reason why a lot of people don't footnote things, because if I commit to a specific piece of information coming from a specific written source, that means that another piece of information that I don't commit to a specific written source, where did that come from? Well, maybe it came from a human source. Now, I've just made it easier in this day and age for those who don't want factual information to get in the hands of the average American citizen, those who want to keep American foreign policy and national security policy secret from the Americans they are supposed to be protecting. They'll go after these people,

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and you know they go after these people. And I'm going to do everything I can to ensure that I don't facilitate harm coming to those who have the courage to assist me in trying to get facts out to people so they can know more about this problem we call Iran.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Why doesn't my colleagues in the American press do better with this story?

SCOTT RITTER: One of the big problems is -- and here goes the grenade -- Israel. The second you mention the word "Israel," the nation Israel, the concept Israel, many in the American press become very defensive. We're not allowed to be highly critical of the state of Israel. And the other thing we're not allowed to do is discuss the notion that Israel and the notion of Israeli interests may in fact be dictating what America is doing, that what we're doing in the Middle East may not be to the benefit of America's national security, but to Israel's national security. But, see, we don't want to talk about that, because one of the great success stories out there is the pro-Israeli lobby that has successfully enabled themselves to blend the two together, so that when we speak of Israeli interests, they say, "No, we're speaking of American interests."

It's interesting that AIPAC and other elements of the Israeli lobby don't have to register as agents of a foreign government. It would be nice if they did, because then we'd know when they're advocating on behalf of Israel or they're advocating on behalf of the United States of America.

I would challenge the *New York Times* to sit down and do a critical story on Israel, on the role of Israel's influence, the role that Israel plays in influencing American foreign policy. There's nothing wrong with Israel trying to influence American foreign policy. Let me make that clear. The British seek to influence our foreign policy. The French seek to influence our foreign policy. The Saudis seek to influence our foreign policy. The difference is, when they do this and they bring American citizens into play, these Americans, once they take the money of a foreign government and they advocate on behalf of that foreign government, they register themselves as an agent of that government, so we know where they're coming from. That's all I ask the Israelis to do. Let us know where you're coming from, because stop confusing the American public that Israel's interests are necessarily America's interests.

I have to tell you right now, Israel has a viable, valid concern about Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. If I were an Israeli, I would be extremely concerned about Hezbollah, and I would want to do everything possible to nullify that organization. As an American, I will tell you, Hezbollah does not threaten the national security of the United States of America one iota. So we should not be

talking about using American military forces to deal with the Hezbollah issue. That is an Israeli problem. And yet, you'll see the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and other media outlets confusing the issue. They want us to believe that Hezbollah is an American problem. It isn't, ladies and gentleman. Hezbollah was created three years after Israel invaded Lebanon, not three years after the United States invaded Lebanon. And Hezbollah's sole purpose was to liberate southern Lebanon from Israeli occupation. I'm not here to condone or sing high praises in virtue for Hezbollah. But I'm here to tell you right now, Hezbollah is not a terrorist organization that threatens the security of the United States of America.

AMY GOODMAN: Former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter, in conversation with Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh. We'll be back with them in a minute.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: We return to the conversation at the Ethical Culture Society between Scott Ritter and Seymour Hersh. Scott Ritter is author of the book, *Target Iran: The Truth About the White House's Plans for Regime Change*. Seymour Hersh is a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist with the *New Yorker* magazine. This is Seymour Hersh.

SEYMOUR HERSH: So, in your book, speaking of Israel, it's sort of interesting reading through it. Let's see. Essentially, you describe Israel as viewing Iran -- the notion of an Iranian nuclear weapon as an existential threat. You describe how Israel collects intelligence -- we could also call it "spies" -- on the International Atomic Energy Agency. This is all sort of revelatory stuff, in a way -- not the first part, but certainly this, that Israel has penetrated and worked very closely with people inside the IAEA, has apartments, safe houses in Vienna, where it does business and basically operates politically inside the IAEA.

Three, you describe in great detail -- again, I think in more detail than has ever been made public -- how much the Israelis have worked very closely with the MEK, the cult, this terrorist group that's now pretty much in play again -- we'll get to that in a minute -- in not only in terms of supporting it and urging us, the United States, to support it, but also much of the intelligence, most of the main things that were learned in this administration about the Iranian nuclear weapons programs, were announced by MEK officials over the years, particularly in August of 2002. There was a major announcement of the underground facilities, a place that many of you now know, Natans. And the extent of digging inside Iran was made public by the MEK. And you write in your book repeatedly how Israel was the source for that intelligence and basically was using the MEK to proselytize and propagandize in America. You also describe, as we said

earlier, extremely active operations by Israel inside Iran, running agents, etc., collecting intelligence.

So, tell us about you and Israel. Are you anti-Semitic? Are you anti-Israel? I know you served there. Tell us about it.

SCOTT RITTER: Well, first of all, I am not anti-Semitic, and I'm definitely not anti-Israeli.

SEYMOUR HERSH: You're certainly not a self-hating Jew, let's make that clear.

SCOTT RITTER: No, I could be a self-hating goyim, but... Unless there's something in my past we haven't uncovered yet.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Like some senators, right?

SCOTT RITTER: But it's irrelevant. The bottom line is I consider myself to be a friend of the state of Israel. I consider myself to be a true friend of the Israeli people. But I define friendship as someone who takes care of a friend, who just doesn't use or exploit a friend. And, you know, there's that old adage: friends don't let friends drive drunk. We used to use that in the anti-drug campaign, the anti-alcohol campaign. That's how I view my friendship with Israel. And when I see a friend preparing to drive drunk or doing something that's going to be harmful to them, or to me, I'll say, "No," I'll say, "Stop." So my criticism of Israel is not from some, you know, Jewish-hating anti-Semitic foundation of myself. No.

As I point out to people, I spent a couple weeks in 1991 working with people to stop Iraqi ballistic missiles from landing on Israeli soil. A lot of good Americans lost their lives in that effort, and we took it seriously. I spent four years in Israel working with the Israeli government on the issue of Iraq. I was very close with Israeli intelligence, very close with the Israeli government, and I have a lot of sympathies for them. I know how they work. I know who the players are.

And I will say this: if I were Israeli, I'd be doing exactly what they're doing. Alright? They have a legitimate concern here. Let's not kid ourselves. It's a small little country. And if a nuclear device goes off inside that small little country, Israel ceases to exist as a viable nation-state. They can't afford any room for error. There is no margin of error here.

That's why Israel has taken the position that not only will they not tolerate an Iranian nuclear weapons program, they will not tolerate nuclear technology that is usable in a nuclear weapons program, in this case, enrichment

technology that Iran is permitted to have under Article 4 of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Israel says no. If Iran can enrich to levels that are usable in a nuclear reactor, that same technology can be used to enrich to levels usable in a nuclear device. Therefore, the Israeli position is “not one spinning rotor,” meaning not one centrifuge allowed to operate inside Iran. That’s a zero-tolerance policy.

Now, Iran’s a big country that carried out a covert program. You know, let’s mention this, too. When the MEK gave the briefing in August of 2002 using what many people have said is Israeli information, guess what? They were right. Let’s not forget that. They didn’t come out and spew garbage. This was not Ahmed Chalabi making stuff up. This is the MEK representative saying there is a facility in Natans involved in the enrichment of uranium, that is being kept secret from the world. And they were right. So let’s give a little tip of the hat to the Israeli intelligence community for getting it right.

But there’s a difference between getting the intelligence right and getting the policy right. And I will tell you right now that the Israelis have the policy wrong, because they have created a system of analysis that deviates from the lessons learned from the Yom Kippur War. At the end of the Yom Kippur War, they basically said there will be no more “*konseptzia*,” meaning we’re going to have a concept of what the enemy thinks. We’re going to conceive what the enemy thinks, project what the enemy thinks.

And they got it wrong. They projected that the Egyptians would never attack on the dates that people talked about. Next thing you know, you’ve got the Third Egyptian Army rolling across the Sinai, and the Israelis got serious problems. They said, “It will be fact-based analysis from now on, and we will double-check and we will triple-check.” One of the more interesting Israelis I’ve met was the Doubting Thomas. He’s the guy -- he’s a colonel. All information that went to the director of military intelligence came through him, all assessments. He sat down and picked them apart. And basically, if you made an assertion, he said, “How do you know this?” If you said x, he said, “Why isn’t it y?” And you had to answer him. You had to come back and explain this, and only then did the analysis get to the director of military intelligence, who is the head of national assessments in Israel. He then takes it to the prime minister. So, imagine that, being the head of state, getting quality intelligence from your intelligence community that’s been double-checked, triple-checked, questioned, so there’s no room for error.

But an interesting thing happened in the aftermath of the Gulf War. Some personalities took over. One, in particular, I write about in the book: Amos Gilad, then a brigadier general. I think he left as a major general. But

Amos Gilad brought back into fruition the notion of *konseptsia*. You see, he conceived the notion of a nexus combining Iran with Hezbollah with Hamas. And he said Israel is at threat. This whole thing is lumped together, and we have to deal with it all. And the head that has to be cut off, if we're going to succeed, is Iran. Iran is the threat. Iran is the problem. Iran must be dealt with. And he started slanting the intelligence assessments that were being presented to the director of military intelligence, this time on what I'll call faith-based analysis, his gut feeling, his belief, but not the facts. This isn't sound factually based analysis. This is a deviation. And unfortunately, the politicians bought off on it.

And again, because we have yet, today, to be able to separate in the American policy formulation that involves Israel, separate Israeli interests from American interests, the Israeli government has been very successful in using the pro-Israeli lobby to make sure that the Israeli concerns, the Israeli point of view, becomes the American point of view. And that's what's happening here.

But, yes, Israel has agents operating inside Iran. They better have agents operating inside Iran. I wish we had more agents operating inside Iran, so we knew more what's going on. Can you blame Israel, because they care about nuclear weapons, for trying to get close to the International Atomic Energy Agency? We do it. Why is the world surprised that Israel is going to do it? When you have inspectors that go into a nation that you have deemed hostile, you want to know what they know. You also want to help guide them. Israel did this in Iraq. And I have to say it was very honorable, what they did. They didn't go in to corrupt the inspection process. They went in to improve, to enhance the inspection process.

But with Iraq, it was fact-based analysis. That's why, at the end of the day, the Israeli government was willing to accept that Iran had been virtually disarmed, that almost all the WMD had been accounted for. In 1998, that was the assessment. Thanks to Amos Gilad, by 2003 Iraq's weapons of mass destruction had been reborn, and he didn't have to explain how they had been reborn. It was *konseptsia*. It was a gut feeling. They were there because Saddam's bad.

The same thing is happening with Iran today, because all of this intelligence that's being done has uncovered a nuclear enrichment program, not a nuclear weapons program. But the Israelis have already concluded, thanks to Amos Gilad and his *konseptsia*, that a nuclear weapons program exists. Therefore, if you're not finding evidence of it, it means you're not looking in the right places. So then you begin to speculate. How many people here remember underground facilities in Iraq, Saddam's tunnels, everything buried? Well, there weren't, were there?

Well, guess what. The Israelis talk about tunnels in Iran. And there are tunnels in Iran. The Iranians have been working with the North Koreans for the last couple decades to perfect deep tunneling techniques, and they are boring in the ground. You saw all those little Hezbollah tunnels in South Lebanon that were so effective against the Israelis? They were dug by the Iranians with North Korean assistance. That comes from the Iranians themselves. And they're doing the same thing in Iran today. And the Israelis are detecting this deep tunneling activity, and they're sending elements in to do reconnaissance on that, but they're not finding any evidence of nuclear-related activity, because there isn't any going on.

But again, thanks to *konseptsia*, Gilad, and the way the Israelis now do their assessments, they immediately equate deep tunneling and a nuclear enrichment program to mean that there's a secret underground nuclear weapons program. Faith-based analysis has trumped fact-based analysis, and because of the pressure put on American policymakers by the Israeli lobby, our own government has now embraced this point of view. And this is very dangerous, ladies and gentleman, because if we accept at face-value, without question, the notion of a nuclear weapons program in Iran, that means the debate's over. It's over, because if Iran has a nuclear weapons program that operates in violation of international law, it's very easy for American policymakers to talk about the imperative to confront this.

And if you can't confront it successfully diplomatically, that leaves only the military option on the table. And right now, that's the direction we're heading, because the debate's over, apparently, about whether or not Iran has a nuclear weapons program, even though the IAEA has come out and said there's no evidence whatsoever to sustain the Bush administration's allegations that such a weapons program exists. Note, I didn't say that the IAEA said there is no such weapons program -- they can't prove that.

But note that the Bush administration has taken this and now changed course, like they did with Iraq. Saddam said, "We don't have any weapons. The inspectors aren't finding any weapons. Keep looking." Why? Because the onus isn't on the inspectors to find the weapons. The onus is on Iraq to prove that none exist. But how can you prove a negative? The same thing is in play today with Iran. We have told the Iranians it is their responsibility to prove to the international community beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is no nuclear weapons program in Iran. How can you prove a negative?

But that's not the point, because it's not about a nuclear weapons program. It's about regime change and the Bush administration using the perception of threat from a

nuclear weapons program to achieve their ultimate objective of regional transformation, which is, again, a policy born more in Tel Aviv than Washington, D.C.

SEYMOUR HERSH: OK. Digression. One of the things you and I used to talk about was, when Scott was an inspector from '91 to '98, he got in a lot of trouble, an awful lot of trouble, with his government, because he would take highly classified information to Israel to be analyzed first, remember? Particularly some of the overhead stuff, U-2 stuff. And that caused you a lot of investigations, a lot of problems in terms of -- just of loyalty issues. But still, the fact is you thought so highly of Israel. I remember you telling me years ago that they could understand what was going on from satellite photographs in six or seven hours. If you gave it to the American system, we were dealing in a week, and you would get a bad analysis. No, that's just -- you had a lot of faith in their intelligence capability.

So, what the hell is going on there? Is it as simple as that? Is it just as simple as a few people at the top playing Ahmed Chalabi? Or is it -- what happened? Why aren't they calling it the way, if you're right, they should?

SCOTT RITTER: Well, again, I think it comes down to -- you know, the Bush administration likes to talk a lot about the nexus, the nexus between weapons of mass destruction and terrorism.

I'll talk about the nexus between the neoconservatives in Washington, D.C., and the right wing of the Likud Party in Israel. These elements, these political elements have been working hand-in-glove for many, many years. And now that the neoconservatives in Washington, D.C., have seized power, have gained power, attained power, now that they're in power, the right wing in Israel has to play this game. They have to deal with the cards that they've been dealt. And so, they're not going to stand up to the United States. You're not going to sit there and try and encourage the United States to make a move on Iran using fact-based information.

You've got to understand there are certain buttons you need to push in Washington, D.C., to get American politicians to move in a certain direction. And you've got to keep it simple. And the simplest thing is to say that there is a nuclear weapons program in Iran. And then, you've got to push some more buttons, because you don't want to treat that in isolation. You want to complicate it further: that nuclear weapons program is in the hands of a nation that is a state-sponsor of terror -- Iran. And the terrorist organizations that they sponsor are inclusive of Hezbollah, Hamas, the Palestinian Liberation Organization Fatah wing. This is all part of the same problem, you see.

And in doing so, Israel now complicates America's overall policy posture vis-a-vis the Middle East, because now it becomes very difficult to treat the Palestinian situation in isolation. It becomes very difficult to treat the Hezbollah situation in isolation or to treat Iran in isolation. Israel has lumped it all together, because they know how to play the American political game, I think, better than we know how to play the American political game. So this is about domestic politics trumping intelligence and sound analytical processes.

AMY GOODMAN: Scott Ritter is the author of *Target Iran: The Truth About the White House's Plans for Regime Change*. Seymour Hersh is a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist with the *New Yorker* magazine. His book is called *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib*. They're speaking at the Ethical Culture Society in New York. [...] We'll come back to Ritter and Hersh in a minute.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: We return to our conversation between Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh and Scott Ritter. This is Seymour Hersh.

SEYMOUR HERSH: I think a lot about the neocons, and what's interesting about the neocons and their influence, as you say, is that if you look at it, in the last few years, they've really lost a lot of the intellectual leadership from direct policy input. Wolfowitz is gone. Richard Perle certainly was no longer head of the Defense Policy Board. He's on the outside. Douglas Feith, who was an undersecretary of defense and very important to Rumsfeld, is gone. So with some of their more important acolytes out of the way, why are we still talking about the neocons? What is it about us that enables them to keep on going, even though many of their leaders -- nobody would define either Bush or Cheney or Rumsfeld as neocons before 2001. They were just realist conservatives. How have we gotten to -- what's your guess about it? I mean, I don't have an answer. Do you have an answer?

SCOTT RITTER: I don't have a definitive answer, but I would say this. If you want to attribute anything to the empowerment of the neoconservatives, attribute eight years of Clinton presidency. You see, the neoconservatives had thrived under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, because we had an evil empire back then, you see? You had an enemy, a focal point. And so, they could sit there and talk about global hegemony, talk about global domination, and no one would hold them to task, because it was widely recognized that we were engaged in a global struggle with another global superpower.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the neoconservative thinkers, these global hegemonists, said, "We can't allow

any power or group of powers to step into that vacuum.” This is 1991, 1992. In fact, in 1992, under the direction of Dick Cheney, who was at that time the Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz and Scooter Libby helped author a vision statement, a policy statement for the Defense Department, that talked about how we divide the world into spheres of strategic influence and how we will intervene unilaterally, prevent preemptively, militarily, if required, to dominate these regions, and that’s what we need to do with the fall of the Soviet Union.

There was a little hiccup along the way of that becoming policy, called an election, where George Herbert Walker Bush, the heir to Ronald Reagan, got defeated, and Bill Clinton came in. And when Clinton came in, all these neoconservative ideologues, who had been shaping and influencing policy for 12 years, were no longer in power. And what they did is they all went off to roost in various neoconservative or conservative or right-leaning think tanks, and they festered for eight years, perfecting this poison that became their policy. And then, when George Bush -- George Walker Bush -- got elected, they came in and assumed power, but they had eight years to basically put a spit shine on their vision of how the world would look.

And they didn’t have an easy time early on. There was a lot of hiccups. If you remember, in the summer of 2001, how critical people were of the Bush administration, of Donald Rumsfeld, of these neoconservative thinkers, because their ideology wasn’t melding with the post-Clinton reality.

Thanks to September 11, 2001, 19 criminals who hijacked four airplanes and flew them into three buildings and a farm field, all that changed. The neoconservatives were successfully able to exploit the ignorance-based fear of the American public to sell them a bill of goods about the world we live in. And as a result, they had a seamless transition from an ideology that America should reject at face value, and it now has become the official policy of the United States of America, the national security policy or strategy of the United States of America, first promulgated in September 2002, most recently updated in June 2006. This policy is almost word for word the same doctrine that Wolfowitz penned in 1992, that the Project for a New American Century put out in 1997. And it is now that which defines how America interfaces with the rest of the world.

SEYMOUR HERSH: But, Scott, answer the question. If they fester, why are they festering? Why do they continue to have this influence? You’ve mentioned another one that’s gone: Libby -- when so many of the intellectual gurus of that group -- I mean, certainly Wolfowitz, Libby was very important, too. Why, given the collapse of policy in Iraq, which is becoming increasingly obvious to

everyone, why are we still there? Why is this country still basically -- the policies of the country still neoconservative? What has been festering? What has been inculcated in us? What's going on?

SCOTT RITTER: Well, again, the reason why I talked about the festering is to point out that they had 12 years of being in power, followed by eight years of being able to take their policy to think tanks and work on it. So that's 20 years that the neoconservatives were able to develop and perfect its ideology.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Yeah, but we've got a constitution. We've got a congress. We've got a press. We've got a bureaucracy. What's going on?

SCOTT RITTER: Because on September 11th, the United States of America suffered its worst defeat, not at the hands of terrorists, but at the hands of the neoconservatives, who basically allowed the terrorists to win by turning America on itself. We have a congress, but Congress only counts when it functions. And when Congress refuses to carry out appropriate oversight, when Congress refuses to hold the President accountable for policy decisions, when Congress stands by idly while we violate international law and indeed the Constitution of the United States, invading a sovereign state without just cause, allowing the torturing of individuals to occur by American service members, when Congress sits by and tolerates warrantless wiretappings, they don't function as a legitimate branch of government.

SEYMOUR HERSH: OK, but let's just go back. We all agree on Congress. But the fact is that when Olmert was here in May, the prime minister of Israel, and gave a speech about Iran to a joint session of Congress, the big applause lines, the standing o's came when he criticized Iran and raised the specter -- the same language you were talking about -- this existential language, this threat, and that was a standing ovation. The fact of the matter is that no matter how you describe it, no matter how we perceive it, if the President orders a military attack on Iran, Congress will rubberstamp it. There's no question about that, in my view. I don't know what you think. And I guess, heuristically, if you will, what's your guess? We want to do a lot of questions, because there may be somebody here who disagrees with what Scott's saying. It takes an awful lot of courage, but anyway.

SCOTT RITTER: I try not to be controversial.

SEYMOUR HERSH: But, so, what's your guess? What happens? October surprise next year? What do you think? What do you think? What's in line for us?

SCOTT RITTER: Well, first of all, let's start with what

you're talking about: the standing ovation that Olmert gets. Why? Why would he get this standing ovation? Because the United States of America has been preconditioned since 1979 to accept at face value anything negative said about the Islamic Republic of Iran. Now, there's a lot of negative things that can be said about the Islamic Republic of Iran. But unfortunately, by allowing ourselves to create this filter that says we don't recognize anything positive, only the negative, we create the conditions where we don't question negative data. And therefore, when people say Iran is a threat, we agree. And this has been going on since 1979. So the American public, and indeed the American Congress, is preconditioned for war, for confrontation with Iran. That's why we can have a policy that transitions from dual containment under the Clinton administration to regime change under the Bush administration, without any significant debate taking place whatsoever.

And because this condition exists, there will be war with Iran, unless a little miracle occurs, called the Democrats winning Congress, creating enough friction to stop the war, in the November elections. But even if that occurs, as you pointed out, there is no separation between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party on the issue of Iran. Everybody sits there and says. "Wait a minute, we're losing the war in Iraq, and there's 65% of the population that's turned against this war. Certainly we're not going to go to war with Iran."

Again, I mean to correct the American public here. 65% of the American public aren't antiwar. They're just anti-losing. You see, if we were winning the war in Iraq, they'd all be for it. If we had brought democracy, they'd be cheering the President. It wouldn't matter that we violated international law. It wouldn't even matter that we lied about weapons of mass destruction. We'd be winning. God bless America. Ain't we good? USA, USA! But we're losing, so they're against Iraq.

But what happens when you get your butt kicked in one game? You're looking for the next game, where you can win. And right now, we're looking for Iran for a victory. We're going to go to war with Iran. When? Not in October, I'll tell you that.

There's a couple things that have to happen before we go to war with Iran. There has to be a serious diplomatic offensive to secure the military basing required to support the aerial forces necessary for sustained bombardment and the logistic apparatus that goes along with that -- the fuel, the bombs, the support personnel, the maintenance. We haven't done that. We're doing it. There has to be political preparation here at home. The Bush administration is not a dictatorship yet. They still have to go to Congress, and they still have to get a degree of congressional approval for military operations against

Iran. Not that much, though. I mean, everybody is aware that after 9/11, Congress pretty much gave the Bush administration a blank check to wage war anyway they saw fit, so long as it dealt with the global war on terror. And the President --

SEYMOUR HERSH: Be specific. The October 2002 resolution was not just limited to Iraq, you're exactly right.

SCOTT RITTER: No, it's a global war on terror.

SEYMOUR HERSH: It gave him the right to -- he's got a blank check. He does have that.

SCOTT RITTER: A blank check to do it.

SEYMOUR HERSH: That's literally correct.

SCOTT RITTER: Now, he has to be smart about this. Yes, he can wage war, but he needs to ensure that Congress continues to fund the war. So that's why he will go to Congress. He will make the case for Iran. But, as I said, Congress is already preprogrammed to nod their head yes and stamp anything he signs.

The most important thing is the American military, getting the American military positioned. The easy thing is getting the air forces positioned, the naval force and air forces that will do the bombardment. The hard thing is getting the American military leadership to go along with that, and that might be the one little glimmer of hope that's out there, because if we can get a Democratic-controlled congress that is not afraid to exercise its oversight responsibility and holds hearings, where it brings in military professionals and liberates them to speak critically of bad policy, which is the duty and responsibility of every general officer.

There's a gross dereliction of duty taking place today in the United States, where our general officers remain mute while they are on active duty. Suddenly, when they retire, they get great courage. They can speak out. But you know what? It's too late. Too many of your men have died. You should have spoke out sooner. And hopefully with a Democratic congress, the generals will speak out. Look at the standards set by the British military. The British chief of staff has come out and finally spoke truth to power by saying, "Mr. Blair, your war is not only not winnable, but it's destroying the British army. And if we want to have an army in five to ten years, we have to change our policy." Maybe American general's will follow that precedent.

SEYMOUR HERSH: I've had some smart Arabs I know, who are not anti-American, per se, but

increasingly, of course, getting that way, say to me that one other -- there's another -- they had another vestige of hope, which was that after the disaster in Lebanon -- and the Israelis are sort of now, their position is we suffered a technical knockout, it wasn't a complete knockout. They're finding a little grace in it. But some of the bright Arabs I know said maybe the Israelis will move to the center. Maybe that'll, one way, will save us. "Save us," being the world, in their view. Certainly the oil world in the Middle East, from continued war. And they said, perhaps -- giving up on the notion that America would move, but maybe the Israeli population would move to the center. No sign yet of it. I don't see it.

SCOTT RITTER: Well, there is a significant -- I mean, that's one of the things that strikes me when I travel to Israel. It's like anything, traveling to Iran, you suddenly have this veil lifted, because, of course, you're not going to get a true picture from the American media about what Iran is, and most Americans, I don't think, have a genuine picture of what Israel is, unless you've gone to Israel, traveled to Israel, met the Israelis. It's a very diverse society. It's not homogeneous at all, especially politically. You know, you sit three Israelis around a table, you get seven different opinions. And that's the truth. These people love politics. They're concerned. They're engaged. And there is a viable powerful moderate and progressive element within Israel.

The battle with Hezbollah this past summer, this conflict in South Lebanon that bled over into northern Israel, could go either way. On the one hand, there are elements that are seeking to exploit the fear factor, the fact that thousands of Hezbollah rockets landed on Israel, to say, "Never again, never again. We must redouble our efforts to confront." But taking a look at how enfeebled the Israeli military was in its response, how Hezbollah was actually empowered, the Israelis might actually come to realize the lesson we're learning in Iraq, which is you cannot militarily defeat an organization that has as its roots the legitimate concerns of an indigenous population. And I'm not here to condone Hezbollah or sing its virtues, but I will tell you this, Hezbollah is an organization of Southern Lebanese Shia. That belong in South Lebanon. They're in South Lebanon. And Israel may have learned a hard lesson, that you just can't bomb these people into submission, so they might move to the center.

SEYMOUR HERSH: [inaudible] is standing. We want to do one more question. Let me ask him one more question. One last question, which is, OK, briefly, we go to war. We begin a massive bombing campaign. Take your pick. Odds are it's going to be systematic, at least three days of intense bombing, decapitation probably, which -- that is one of the things you do when you begin a bombing attack, like we did against Saddam twice and like the Israelis did against Hezbollah when they targeted

Nasrallah. And I think we and the Israelis are now 0-for-8, almost as bad as Shrummy and his elections. But anyway, so the question then is -- we go to war -- tell us what happens next, in your view.

SCOTT RITTER: Well, it's, you know -- it's almost impossible to be 100% correct, but I'll give you my best analysis. The Iranians will use the weapon that is the most effective weapon, because the key for Iran -- you know, Iran can't afford, if this -- remember, the regime wants to stay in power, so they can't afford a strategy that gets the American people to recognize three years in that, oops, we made a mistake. I mean, if that was Saddam's strategy, it failed for him, because he's out of power. Yeah, we realize we made a mistake now in Iraq, but the regime is gone. So the Iranians realize that they have to inflict pain upfront. The pain is not going to be inflicted militarily, because we're not going to commit numbers of ground forces on the ground that can cause that pain. The pain will come economically.

Our oil-based economy is operating on the margins, as we speak. We only have 1.0% to 1.5% excess production capacity. If you take the Iranian oil off the market, which is the first thing the Iranians will do, we automatically drop to around minus-4%, which means there ain't enough oil out there to support the globe's thirst for oil, especially America's thirst for oil. And we're not the only ones drinking it? You think for a second the Chinese and the Indians, the world's two largest developing economies, are going to say, "Hey, Uncle Sam, we'll put everything on hold, so we can divert oil resources, so you can feed your oil addiction, because you attacked Iran"?

And it's not just Iranian oil that will go off the market. Why do you think we sent minesweepers up there? We've got to keep the Straits of Hormuz open. The Iranians will shut it down that quick. They'll also shut down oil production in the western oil fields of Saudi Arabia. They'll shut down Kuwaiti oil production. They'll shut down oil production in the United Arab Emirates. They'll shut down whatever remaining oil production there is in Iraq. They'll launch a massive attack using their Shia proxies in Iraq against American forces. That will cause bloodshed.

The bottom line is, within two days of our decision to initiate an attack on Iran, every single one of you is going to be feeling the consequences of that in your pocketbook. And it's only going to get worse. This is not something that only I recognize. Ask Dick Lugar what information he's getting from big business, who are saying, "We can't afford to go to war with Iran."

SEYMOUR HERSH: Final question: given all this, are we going to do it?

SCOTT RITTER: Yes, we're going to do it.

AMY GOODMAN: Scott Ritter and Seymour Hersh. Ritter's latest book is called *Target Iran: The Truth About the White House's Plans for Regime Change*. Seymour Hersh is a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist with the *New Yorker* magazine. His latest book is called a *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib*. They were speaking at the New York Society for Ethical Culture at an event sponsored by the Nation Institute. Again, the latest news, the Pentagon has disclosed plans to send more warships and aircraft into the Persian Gulf within striking distance of Iran.

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