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## Where is the *USS Nimitz*?

In the latest flurry of media coverage on U.S.-Iranian standoff, the mainstream media has neglected to mention that the United States is massing warships in the Persian Gulf. Why?

**Michael T. Clare and Renato Redentor Constantino**

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### **Warships, Warships Everywhere, and Many a Bomb to Drop Persian Gulf Update By Michael T. Clare**

Looking down from the captain's deck some six stories high, the flight deck of the *USS Nimitz* is an impressive sight indeed: 80 sleek warplanes armed with bombs and missiles are poised for takeoff at any minute, day or night. The sight of these planes coming and going from that 1,100-foot-long flight deck is almost beyond description. I can attest to this, having sailed on the *Nimitz* 25 years ago as a reporter for *Mother Jones* magazine.

Today, the *Nimitz* is rapidly approaching the Persian Gulf, where it will join two other U.S. aircraft carriers and the French carrier *Charles De Gaulle* in the largest concentration of naval firepower in the region since the launching of the U.S. invasion of Iraq four years ago.

Why this concentration now? Officially, the *Nimitz* is on its way to the Gulf to replace the *USS Dwight D. Eisenhower*, which is due to return to the United States for crew leave and ship maintenance after months on station. But the U.S. Central Command (Centcom), which exercises command authority over all U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf area, refuses to say when the *Eisenhower* will actually depart -- or even when the *Nimitz* will arrive.

For a time, at least, the United States will have three carrier battle groups in the region. The *USS John C. Stennis* is the third. Each carrier is accompanied by a small flotilla of cruisers, destroyers, submarines, and support vessels, many equipped with Tomahawk land-attack cruise missiles (TLAMs). Minimally, this gives modern meaning to the classic imperial term "gunboat diplomacy," which makes it all the stranger that the deployment of the *Nimitz* is covered in our media, if at all, as the most minor of news stories. And when the *Nimitz* sailed off into the Pacific last month on its way to the Gulf, it simply disappeared off media radar screens like some classic "lost patrol."

Rest assured, unlike us, the Iranians have noticed. After all, with the arrival of the *Nimitz* battle group, the Bush administration will be -- for an unknown period of time -- in an optimal position to strike Iran with a punishing array of bombs and missiles should the President decide to carry out his oft-repeated threat to eliminate Iran's nuclear program through military action. "All options," as the administration loves to say, remain ominously "on the table."

Meanwhile, negotiations to resolve the impasse with Iran over its pursuit of uranium-enrichment technology -- a possible first step to the manufacture of nuclear weapons -- continue at the United Nations in New York and in various European capitals. So far, the Iranians have refused to give any ground, claiming that their activities are intended for peaceful uses only and so are permitted under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), of which it is a signatory. The United States has made vague promises of improved relations if and when Iran terminates its nuclear program, but the full burden of making initial concessions falls on Tehran.

Just this weekend, a conference in Egypt, called by Iraqi officials to explore regional approaches to stability in the region (with Iranian officials expected to be in attendance), was being viewed in

Washington as yet another opportunity to pressure Tehran to be more submissive to the West's demands on a wide range of issues, including Iranian support for Shiite militias in Iraq.

President Bush keeps insisting that he would like to see these "diplomatic" endeavors -- as he describes them -- succeed, but he has yet to bring up a single proposal or incentive that might offer any realistic prospect of eliciting a positive Iranian response.

And so, knowing that his "diplomatic" efforts are almost certain to fail, Bush may simply be waiting for the day when he can announce to the American people that he has "tried everything"; that "his patience has run out"; and that he can "no longer risk the security of the American people" by "indulging in further fruitless negotiations," thereby allowing the Iranians "to proceed farther down the path of nuclear bomb-making," and so has taken the perilous but necessary step of ordering American forces to conduct air and missile strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. At that point, the 80 planes aboard the *Nimitz* -- and those on the *Eisenhower* and the *Stennis* as well -- will be on their way to targets in Iran, along with hundreds of TLAMs and a host of other weapons now being assembled in the Gulf.

**Forever Iran**  
**On the Fortuitous Poverty of Memory**  
**By Renato Redentor Constantino**

An opening benediction:

Hallowed Homeland, great Fatherland,  
Bless the star-spangled armada massing today in the Persian Gulf.  
Bless the gallant, nuclear-powered cavalry.  
They have come once more near the place of the malefactors called Iranians to punish  
purveyors of fell deeds.

Glorious, indispensable nation,  
Bless your cruisers, destroyers, and submarines.  
Part the sea for the steel raiment of the *USS Nimitz*, the *USS Dwight D. Eisenhower*, and  
the *USS John C. Stennis* aircraft carrier battle groups.  
Purify your soldiers so they may do the bidding of the red, white and Bush.  
Bring them to temptation but lead them away from the epiphany of remembrance.  
The men do not care to remember,  
And the women would rather forget,  
And the innocent bombs, they know not what they do.

Twenty stark years ago, on May 17, 1987, a double act of Exocet missiles skimmed through the air and slammed into the American Perry-class frigate the *USS Stark*.

The first Exocet antiship missile punched into the warship "at 600 miles per hour and exploded in the forward crew's quarters." The warhead failed to detonate but managed to smash through seven bulkheads and spit 120 pounds of blazing rocket fuel into the ship's bunks.

Half a minute later, the second missile exploded, creating a 3,500-degree fireball that turned most of the 37 American victims of the attack into ash. The ship burned for two days, according to the celebrated British war reporter Robert Fisk, who replowed the soil of the incident in his fine memoir, *The Great War for Civilization*. "Even after she was taken in tow," wrote Fisk, "the fires kept reigniting."

"Memory is a complicated thing," says Barbara Kingsolver in her novel *Animal Dreams*. "It's a relative of truth but not its twin."

The deadly missile attack on the *USS Stark* was unleashed by a Mirage F-1 jet -- flown by an Iraqi pilot who mistook the U.S. warship for an Iranian vessel. At that moment, Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran were in the seventh year of a war that had begun in 1980 with a surprise Iraqi invasion.

The act of aggression that claimed the lives of the *Stark's* precious men and women in uniform elicited a fierce barrage of angry denunciation from the United States. The assault was despicable, villainous, and depraved. These were the words of a bellicose U.S. establishment and they were aimed -- at Iran.

Glory to the gospel of perpetual dividends. This was the 1980s, after all; a time when the Reagan

administration was still busy fondling Saddam Hussein.

There would be no counter-strike at Iraq, of course. Not then. And the angriest criticism would come from Secretary of State Caspar Weinberger, who described the attack as "indiscriminate." "Apparently," said Weinberger, the Iraqi pilot "didn't care enough to find out what ship he was shooting at."

"We've never considered them hostile at all," was the way President Ronald Reagan described Saddam's military. "They've never been in any way hostile... And the villain in the piece is Iran."

The Iraqi attack on the *USS Stark* and the loss of American lives proved an opportunity, which America's high and mighty, Democrats as well as Republicans, immediately seized upon. Responding to the great loss of lives "in a spasm of rage at the one country that had nothing to do with the American deaths," Republican Senator and ex-Secretary of the Navy John Warner denounced Iran as "a belligerent that knows no rules, no morals." In language that hinted of military action, Democratic Senator John Glenn slammed Iran as "the sponsor of terrorism and the hijacker of airliners."

It was the first and only successful cruise missile attack on a U.S. Navy warship. Iraqi officials determined that the American frigate was inside their "forbidden zone" and never produced the plane's pilot. The captain of the *USS Stark* was relieved of his command and his executive officer was disciplined for "dereliction of duty."

A little over a year after the attack, on July 3, 1988, two surface-to-air missiles are fired by the *USS Vincennes*, an Aegis-class cruiser, reportedly inside Iranian territorial waters at the time, at Iran Air flight 655. The first missile cut the civilian airliner in half. All 290 passengers and crew aboard the Iranian airbus were killed.

In her coffin, reported Fisk, who, at the time, was in the Iranian port city of Bandar Abbas where the human remains of flight 655 were collected, Leila Behbahani was still in the same garments and bracelets that she had worn when she was fished out of the water minutes after the *Vincennes* brought down the passenger plane -- a green dress and white pinafore, two bright gold bangles on each wrist, white socks, and tiny black shoes. Leila was three-years old. There were 66 children on board the aircraft.

The Pentagon claimed that the *Vincennes* shot down the Iranian plane because it appeared the pilot was attempting to fly it into the warship -- even though the *USS Sides*, a frigate in the area, recorded the airliner climbing, not diving.

Glory to the Homeland.

When the *Vincennes* returned to San Diego, its homeport, the ship was given a hero's welcome, while the members of the crew were "all awarded combat action ribbons." The air warfare coordinator of the ship won the Navy's Commendation Medal "for heroic achievement" for the "ability to maintain his poise and confidence under fire." Citizens in Vincennes, Indiana, raised money to build a monument -- not to the dead Iranians but to the ship that shot them down.

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**[Note: All the accounts of the missile attack on the *USS Stark* and the downing of Iranian flight 655 are from Robert Fisk's harrowing book [\*The Great War for Civilization: The Conquest of the Middle East\*](#).]**

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