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“From the Wonderful Folks Who Brought You Iraq”: Craig Unger on How the Neoconservatives Are Pushing For An Attack on Iran

“Once again, neocon ideologues have been flogging questionable intelligence about W.M.D.,” Unger writes. “Once again, dubious Middle East exile groups are making the rounds in Washington—this time urging regime change in Syria and Iran. Once again, heroic new exile leaders are promising freedom

New allegations against Iran are heightening fears the Bush administration is planning a second war in the Persian Gulf. This weekend, administration and military officials accused the Iranian government of sending sophisticated roadside bombs to Iraq that have killed 170 coalition troops in the last three years. Military officials formally unveiled the charges at an unusual news conference in Baghdad. The officials refused to be quoted by name and barred all recording devices from the room. Reporters were shown images of weapons with serial numbers the Pentagon says originate in Iran.

The Iranian government is denying the accusations. On Monday, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was asked by ABC’s Diane Sawyer whether Iran is sending weapons into Iraq to kill Americans.

- **Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**, talking to ABC’s Diane Sawyer.

Meanwhile, the top US military commander, General Peter Pace, added to growing doubts about the accusations Monday when he admitted he could not endorse them.

- **Gen. Peter Pace**: “Gen. Peter Pace: “We know that the explosively formed projectiles are manufactured in Iran. What I would not say is that the Iranian government, per se, knows about this. It is clear that Iranians are involved, and it’s clear that materials from Iran are involved, but I would not say by what I know that the Iranian government clearly knows or is complicit.”

General Peter Pace, speaking in Australia. The Bush administration is insisting the new allegations do not signify a build-up towards war. In an interview with C-Span Monday, President Bush defended the White House pressure on Iran and mocked speculation of a possible US attack.

- **President Bush:** “I guess my reaction to all the noise about, you know, ‘He wants to go to war’ is, first of all, I don’t understand the tactics, and I guess I would say it’s political.”

Amid these new developments, a new article in Vanity Fair magazine says the behind-the-scenes maneuvering that led to the Iraq war is being repeated today. The article says: “Once again, neocon ideologues have been flogging questionable intelligence about W.M.D. Once again, dubious Middle East exile groups are making the rounds in Washington—this time urging regime change in Syria and Iran. Once again, heroic new exile leaders are promising freedom.”

The article is called [“From the Wonderful Folks Who Brought You Iraq.”](#) Craig Unger is the author of the piece. He joins me here in the firehouse studio. Welcome to Democracy Now!

- **Craig Unger**, journalist and author. His latest article appears in Vanity Fair. It’s called “From the Wonderful Folks Who Brought You Iraq.” He is the author of “House of Bush, House of Saud: The Secret Relationship Between the World’s Two Most Powerful Dynasties.”

AMY GOODMAN: On Monday, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was asked by ABC’s Diane Sawyer whether Iran is sending weapons into Iraq to kill Americans.

MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD: [translated] When it comes to Iraq, we have made it clear that insecurity in Iraq is also to our disadvantage and also to the disadvantage of the nations of the region, and we will be sad to see people get killed, no matter who they are.

DIANE SAWYER: The Americans have the pictures. They have rocket-propelled grenade launchers that have Iranian serial numbers on them, and that they go back to 2006.

MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD: [translated] I think that Americans have made a mistake in Iraq, and unfortunately they are losing, and this is a shame for Americans, of course, and that’s why they are trying to point their fingers to other people. And pointing fingers to others will not solve the problem.

AMY GOODMAN: Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad speaking to ABC’s Diane Sawyer. Meanwhile, the top US military commander, General Peter Pace, added to growing doubts about the accusations Monday, when he admitted he could not endorse them.

GEN. PETER PACE: We know that the explosively formed projectiles are manufactured in Iran. What I would not say is that the Iranian government, per se, knows about this. It is clear that Iranians are involved, and it’s clear that terrorists from Iran are involved. But I would not say, based on what I know, that the Iranian government clearly knows or is complicit.

AMY GOODMAN: General Peter Pace speaking in Australia. The Bush administration is insisting the new allegations do not signify a build-up towards war. In an interview with C-SPAN Monday, President Bush defended the White House pressure on Iran and mocked speculation of a possible US attack.

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH: This is typical Washington, where people are out speculating, and I do think it makes sense to make it clear to the Iranians through the international community that they are isolating themselves, and we will continue to press hard to do so. I guess my reaction to all the noise about, you know, “he wants to go to war” is—first of all, I don’t understand the tactics, and I guess I would say it’s political.

AMY GOODMAN: Amid these new developments a new article in *Vanity Fair* magazine says the behind-the-scenes maneuvering that led to the Iraq war is being repeated today. The article says, “Once again, neocon ideologues have been flogging questionable intelligence about WMD. Once again, dubious Middle East exile groups are making the rounds in Washington, this time urging regime change in Syria and Iran. Once again, heroic new exile leaders are promising freedom.” The article is called “From the Wonderful Folks Who Brought You Iraq.” Craig Unger is the author of the piece, joins me here in the firehouse studio. Welcome to *Democracy Now!*

CRAIG UNGER: Thanks for having me.

AMY GOODMAN: So, lay out who is pushing for this, the history of this, Craig.

CRAIG UNGER: Well, you can certainly trace it back at least ten years to 1996, when Benjamin Netanyahu had just been elected prime minister of Israel, came to the United States. He met with an Israeli American think tank with Richard Perle and some of his colleagues, and then he put together a paper called “A Clean Break,” which outlined a radical new vision of democracy for the Middle East. And this called for war with Iraq, for overturning Saddam, regime change with Saddam Hussein. Two days later, Netanyahu made a speech before a joint session of the United States Congress, and he added another country to the list, which was Iran.

AMY GOODMAN: And where did it go from there? That’s 1996.

CRAIG UNGER: Well, in 1999, actually, Richard Perle started meeting with then-candidate George Bush, and this has really not been reported much at all, but he came away with that meeting saying that Bush had agreed that if he were to be president, he would help overthrow Saddam. So, that, to me, is the first time I know that Bush seemed to have signed off on that. If you talk to the neocons today, a lot of them will say, “Well, yes, it’s a mess in Iraq, but that’s because we’ve just begun. We haven’t really started. This should be a regional war, that Iran is the real focus.”

AMY GOODMAN: Can you talk about the meetings between neoconservatives and Iranian exile groups?

CRAIG UNGER: Well, you have two important people who have shown up. One is Farid Ghadry, who is a Syrian. He may be—so far as I know, he’s the only Syrian exile who’s a member of AIPAC, the rightwing Israeli lobby. He actually sent out mass emails—he’s been compared to Ahmed Chalabi so often that he actually sent out a mass email that was headlined “I Am Not the New Ahmed Chalabi.” And Reza Pahlavi, the son of the Shah of Iran, has also been put forth as a potential leader of Iran.

AMY GOODMAN: Can you talk about the people then who were pushing for Iran, then going on to push for Iraq, now, much discredited, how they have the power today?

CRAIG UNGER: Right. Well, I think if you go back to November, it looked like President Bush was really on the ropes in terms of this policy. The Democrats had just won both sections of Congress. Just after the election, Rumsfeld was sort of thrown overboard. And in the meantime, you also had the Iraq Study Group with James Baker, who is a very close friend of the President’s family, and he was putting forth a bipartisan solution that really acknowledged that Bush’s Iraq policy was a failure and that it was time to start cutting our losses.

In the meantime, however, Vice President Cheney seemed to be keeping a very, very low profile, and it’s useful to remember that his wife Lynne is at the American Enterprise Institute, and they suddenly came up with a new policy paper called “Choosing Victory,” written by Frederick Kagan, and General Jack Keane contributed to it, as well. And this was the policy for a surge. So, it ended up becoming a rival policy to the Iraq Study Group, and that’s what Bush chose.

AMY GOODMAN: Can you talk about the Institute for Advanced Strategic Political Studies?

CRAIG UNGER: Well, this is where Richard Perle and Meyrav Wurmser, who I interviewed, and her husband David, who is now head of Middle East policy for Dick Cheney, and they put together this policy, “A Clean Break.” The term, “A Clean Break,” meant a clean break from the land-for-peace formula that was being used to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, and this was a real radical departure. If you go all the way back to the 1967 Six-Day War with Israel and the Middle East, Israel had won enormous amounts of territory. Their policy then was to start trading it for peace, a land-for-peace formula, and President Carter in 1978 managed to get Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Begin of Israel to sign the Camp David Accords, which has lasted for nearly thirty years now. The rest of that formula, though, has been much, much more difficult to implement, and the neoconservatives decided to discard that in favor of a completely new vision that was far more radical and meant a sweeping overhaul of the Middle East.

AMY GOODMAN: [Craig Unger, can you talk about MEK and the neocon links to this group? What is it?](#)

CRAIG UNGER: [Well, it does seem like a horrible replay of the events leading up to Iraq in many ways. The MEK is Mujahidin-e-Khalq, and it’s a terrorist group, really, that](#)

worked for Saddam Hussein. When the United States invaded Iraq, we captured many of these people and started using them to do covert operations inside Iran, and we have gotten intelligence from them. Once again, it seems a replay, in the sense that—in the way that the neoconservatives used Ahmed Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress with the Iraq war. It looks like they're trying to do the same thing all over again. And, once again, the intelligence seems to be rather dubious.

AMY GOODMAN: You talked about how Richard Perle was the guest speaker at a fundraiser sponsored by the MEK, though he later claimed he had not been aware of the connection.

CRAIG UNGER: That's what he says, at least, yes. You know, I'm not so sure I believe him on that.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, explain how that happens.

CRAIG UNGER: Well, there was a front group backing it, and I guess he's making the case—he did not respond to my calls, but he had made the case that he was unaware that the money for this event was going to the MEK. Other members of the—other neoconservative policymakers, such as Raymond Tanter, have come out very much in favor of using the MEK.

AMY GOODMAN: And explain who Raymond Tanter is.

CRAIG UNGER: He is a neocon policymaker, who has suggested using actually tactical nuclear weapons in bombing Iran.

AMY GOODMAN: He's with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy?

CRAIG UNGER: Right. So, here, again, I mean, you see potential extraordinary escalation of events, when—the bottom line is, if you listen to the International Atomic Energy Agency, they have—we just saw a clip of ElBaradei saying that there's no real evidence that Iran's nuclear program is actually a nuclear weapons program. And, once again, I think you see Iran, like Iraq, trying to have it both ways, bluffing, trying to present themselves as a great regional power by putting forth the notion that they have weapons of mass destruction, but also saying, "Well, gee, there's no real evidence that we have it," when it comes to the United States.

AMY GOODMAN: Greg Unger, explain how Zalmay Khalilzad fits into this picture—was at the White House, becomes ambassador to Afghanistan, then ambassador to Iraq, and now ambassador to the United Nations.

CRAIG UNGER: Right. Well, he goes way back, and if you go to 1991 or '92, I believe, he was in the Defense Department with Dick Cheney, remember, who was Secretary of Defense right during and right after the Gulf War of 1991. Even before the 1996 "A Clean Break" policy, in 1991 Cheney was charged with coming up with a new policy for

American supremacy, and he had—Khalilzad and Paul Wolfowitz were in the Defense Department back then. So this is really the first time you see neocon policymakers come up with a policy, and their paper was known as the “Defense Policy Guidance” paper, even before “A Clean Break,” came up with this vision of radically overhauling the Middle East.

AMY GOODMAN: And how central is Khalilzad in all of this?

CRAIG UNGER: Well, he is very important. Now, of course, he’s up for being ambassador to the United Nations. He has been ambassador to Iraq, and he was in Afghanistan, as well. So he has been a key player all along.

AMY GOODMAN: We now know about the Iranian peace offer in May of 2003 that was rejected by the Bush administration. Can you talk about this?

CRAIG UNGER: Well, it was sort of known as the grand bargain, because it put almost all of the issues of the Middle East on the table. That included the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it included Iran’s nuclear program, and it included Iran’s security issues. Back then, we were in an extraordinarily strong position vis-à-vis Iran. That is, we went into first to Afghanistan and took care of Iran’s number two enemy, the Taliban. Then we were just going into Iraq and taking care of their number one enemy. The Bush administration, it seems to me, could have gotten something out of this. This was a point at which the United States had extraordinary leverage over Iran, and in many ways we had shared interests vis-à-vis both Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran had enormous security issues. They’re surrounded by nuclear powers, if you think about it; Israel and Pakistan are very close to them. So they had very real security concerns, and there are—it’s very tough to trust them, but this was an opening, and we did not even respond to it. In fact, the administration rebuked the Swiss ambassador, Timothy Guldemann, for even bringing up the subject with us?

AMY GOODMAN: Why?

CRAIG UNGER: The administration policy has been, we do not talk to our enemies. And I think that has not kept us in good stead, in the least.

AMY GOODMAN: We’re talking to Craig Unger, journalist and author. His latest piece is in *Vanity Fair*. It’s called “From the Wonderful Folks Who Brought You Iraq.” When we come back, we’ll continue our conversation with him, and we’ll be joined by Rick MacArthur of *Harper’s* to talk about the latest news on weapons from Iran, or at least the allegations about them. Stay with us.