

The suspect provenance of the NIE report

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The Wall Street Journal editorial that ran this morning echoes and expands upon suspicions first articulated by the New York Sun that the National Intelligence Estimate was cooked up by bureaucrats eager to embarrass George Bush and transform US policy towards Iran.

A dynamic is at work that will serve Iranian interests by throwing a wrench in plans to expand sanctions against it for its nuclear program; it also will serve to veto any plans to attack its nuclear facilities.

The three main authors of this report are former State Department officials with previous reputations that should lead one to doubt their conclusions. All three are ex-bureaucrats who, as is generally true of State Department types, favor endless rounds of negotiation and "diplomacy" and oppose confrontation. These three officials, according to the Wall Street Journal, have "reputations as hyper-partisan anti-Bush officials". They are Tom Fingar, formerly of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research; Vann Van Diepen, the National Intelligence Officer for WMD; and Kenneth Brill, the former U.S. Ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Tom Fingar was a State Department employee who was an expert on China and Germany -- he has no notable experience, according to his bio in the Middle East and its geopolitics. Vann Van Diepen is also a career State Department bureaucrat who, according to the New York Sun, is one of the State Department bureaucrats who want "revenge" for having their views regarding Iran ignored by the Bush Administration. He is now seeking to further his own agenda. As the Sun wrote in their editorial yesterday: Vann Van Diepen, one of the estimate's main authors, has spent the last five years trying to get America to accept Iran's right to enrich uranium. Mr. Van Diepen no doubt reckons that in helping push the estimate through the system, he has succeeded in influencing the policy debate in Washington. The bureaucrats may even think they are stopping another war. Vann Diepen also shares a lack of experience in dealing with Iran or the region.

The third main author comes in for particular criticism in the Wall Street Journal editorial. Kenneth Brill served as the US Ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency (the IAEA). This is an agency that has served to enable Iranian's quest for nuclear weapons. The head of the IAEA, Mohammed ElBaradei, has even been called a friend by the Iranian regime. As he should be, for he has been an enabler of its nuclear weapons program and has stiff-armed European Union diplomats who have worked to restrain Iran.

ElBaradei and the IAEA have over-reached and now seek to control diplomatic negotiations with Iran -- a function that is beyond its mandate. Brill was apparently unwilling to stop this mission creep and put an end to ElBaradei's efforts to help Iran. Or, as the Wall Street Journal hints, maybe he was just incompetent. This hint comes from former US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton's (who headed counter-proliferation efforts in the State Department previous to his UN posting) new book: For a flavor of their political outlook, former Bush Administration antiproliferation official John Bolton recalls in his recent memoir that then-Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage "described Brill's efforts in Vienna, or lack thereof, as 'bull --.'" Mr. Brill was "retired" from the State Department by Colin Powell before being rehired, over considerable internal and public protest, as head of the National Counter-Proliferation Center by then-National Intelligence Director John Negroponte. Brill also has no previous history of experience dealing with Iran. (He graduated from Business School at Berkeley in 1973!).

All three of the authors of this NIE study are former State Department employees (none of them are nuclear physicists). All who are familiar with the ways of Washington know that the State Department is a fourth branch of government -- at least in its own collective mind -- that seeks to forge its own policies which may often conflict with the policies desired by its putative boss, the President. Washington being Washington, this desire can manifest itself in ways fair and foul.

As the Bush Administration winds down to its conclusion, perhaps these three authors are angling for positions in the new Administration (presumably a Democratic one). They may hope to be rewarded for their "analysis" since Democrats are already using this report for partisan gain.

We have three State Department flexing their muscles to derail our policy towards Iran. This has apparently had a ripple effect, as our allies have expressed a belief that this NIE report will stop efforts to enact a new round of sanctions against Iran. Who gains? Iran.

This is one more step that will be noted in the future that enabled Iran to develop a nuclear arsenal.*

* Recent reports, by Kenneth Timmerman and others, indicate that a single human source may be responsible for the conclusions of the NIE. This would probably be a former aide to the Iranian defense minister and a retired general with long service in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard (recently categorized as a terrorist entity) who disappeared in Europe earlier in the year.

One should recall the notorious Curveball -- also a human source -- whose "stories" led the CIA to conclude that Iraq had an active WMD program. Curveball lied and our use of him for intelligence has been widely castigated. Are we relying now on an Iranian with a long history of service to the Iran Revolutionary Guard for our intelligence? Could he be a plant to distort our intelligence? Has history repeated itself as a farce and as a tragedy?