

## PRIVATIZING FOREIGN POLICY

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In 1977, the venerable foreign-policy expert George Kennan made the following observation: “Our actions in the field of foreign affairs are the convulsive reactions of politicians to an internal political life dominated by vocal minorities.”<sup>1</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, making foreign policy by “convulsive reaction...to an internal political life” has had increasingly dangerous consequences for the United States. This paper will explore why important aspects of our foreign policy have indeed been captured by “vocal minorities” (as I will phrase it, aspects of foreign policy have been “privatized”) and why this has proved detrimental to the country’s foreign relations. I will look first at the general public attitude toward foreign affairs and see how (a) this has led, almost inevitably, to the privatization of important aspects of current policy, and (b) how this, in turn, has undermined the notion of national interest. I will then take up some examples of privatized foreign policy and explore their consequences.

### **PAYING LITTLE ATTENTION TO FOREIGN POLICY**

In the last 60 years, it has only been in times of crisis that increased numbers of Americans have shown any consistent

interest in the world abroad.<sup>2</sup> When the apparent threat subsides, or at least seems to, foreign relations return to being foreign to the mind of the average citizen, and domestic issues reassert their dominance. For instance, Gallup polls taken every presidential election year since 1976 show that, with the exception of 2004 (the first post-9/11 election year), foreign affairs were of little concern to most American citizens.<sup>3</sup> As to the how and why of foreign-policy formulation, it is safe to conclude that the great majority of Americans do not know how foreign policy is made and probably do not really care. Few Americans learn foreign languages, relatively few possess passports, and, except in times of war or crisis, the media’s foreign coverage is slim.<sup>4</sup>

None of this is unusual, particularly in a geographically isolated country like the United States. Under normal conditions, most people will naturally focus on their local environment. The literary tradition that demeans this localism, ranging from Karl Marx’s “idiocy of rural life” to George Eliot’s “the dead level of provincial life,” is unfair. On a day-to-day basis, the local environment supplies the vast majority with their arena of work and sustenance and is where one finds friends, peer groups and a family circle. To use a Darwinian formula,

it is the local environment that supplies the majority with the knowledge necessary to make useful predictions; thus a concentration on this arena has survival value. Even in this age of international travel, satellite dishes and economic globalization, we are still, as individuals and in our daily practice, village oriented.

Nonetheless, while there are reasons for the citizenry to concentrate interest and knowledge on the immediate environment, there are also dangers inherent in this provincialism. "Tuning out the rest of the globe,"<sup>5</sup> as Alkman Granitsas puts it, means that most of us live in ignorance about what is going on beyond the next hill. This can result in a false sense of security right up to the moment of crisis, when suddenly a threat looms on the horizon. At that point, the increased numbers of citizens drawn to pay attention to foreign affairs discover their own ignorance and, of necessity, turn for information to others who, it is assumed, know what is going on abroad. These others — government officials, news "pundits" and "experts" — may or may not have vested interests that lead them to present a biased picture of events from afar. In either case, it is this limited category of "opinion makers" who are almost automatically sought out by the mainstream media to produce the interpretations upon which citizens rely in order to make sense of foreign events. Thus, a general ignorance of outside events leads to the public's dependence on media-edited news and "establishment" experts.<sup>6</sup>

### **POWERLESS INDIVIDUALS AND ENGAGED INTEREST GROUPS**

To this state of general ignorance of and indifference to the world abroad, we can add the average citizen's sense of

political impotence. Most ordinary people feel powerless to influence government policy beyond their local sphere. That is one reason why so many of them do not bother to vote in elections.<sup>7</sup> And, this alienation only further confirms most citizens in their localism and deepens their dependence on the media and its "experts" for news. Once more, this feeling of political powerlessness is not unusual in a country with a large and complex political system where there is little or no room for votes of no confidence, third parties and feasible recall efforts. To take advantage of the structures of power one must be motivated to master the bureaucratic maze and myriad rules of the system.

Over time, the minority of Americans motivated to activism and understanding the power inherent in the political system have developed ways around the problem of the powerless citizen. In doing so, they have transformed our society (at least beyond the very local scale) from a democracy of individual citizens into a democracy of competing interest groups. Motivated individuals with similar preoccupations and goals come together and form an interest group that pools financial resources and votes. Then, as lobbies, they use these resources to influence politicians and government officials to shape legislation and policy to their liking. This happens all the time on the domestic political scene. It also happens when it comes to foreign policy. In both cases, it should be noted, the propaganda and rationalizations of the lobby quickly help to define the world for its members and equate the group's future well being with the lobby's influence over government policy. In the case of foreign-policy formulation, the effectiveness of special interests

is helped along by the normal indifference the general public shows in events abroad. Simply put, the interest-group nature of our politics, combined with popular indifference, maximizes the influence over foreign-policy formulation of those lobbies (Kennan's "vocal minorities") that do have interests abroad. As we will see, it is in this way that foreign policy becomes privatized.

## CONSEQUENCES FOR FOREIGN RELATIONS

### The Doubtful Status of National Interests

The active role of interest groups in foreign-policy formulation makes the notion of national interest problematic. American citizens assume that such a thing as the national interest exists and, in some formal way, guides the government in making the nation's foreign policies. Also, some three out of four citizens seem to believe that "moral principles" play a "guiding" role in the pursuit of national interests.<sup>8</sup> However, can these assumptions be true in an environment where foreign policy is often the product of the desires of dominant lobbies pursuing parochial interests?

Of course, in the abstract one can always come up with a list of ends that should constitute national interests, like maintaining a military posture adequate to national defense or assuring access to sufficient energy resources. But who has the policy-shaping influence to sway politicians on such questions as to what is adequate and sufficient? Who helps decide the parameters and priorities that shape the pursuit of these ends? Given its record of indifference to foreign policy, it cannot be the informed opinions of the public at large. And, if the public is not

engaged in a discussion of what the nation's interests or guiding moral principles are, how can we assume that the foreign-policy formulation process references such things at all?

### The Triumph of Parochialism

How does foreign-policy formulation actually take place? In theory, foreign policy is made by the executive branch of government with financing and, in terms of treaties, "advice and consent" from Congress. The president receives the assistance and guidance of the State Department, the National Security Council and various intelligence agencies. He and they are supposedly guided by national interests. Yet, in practice, the president and the members of Congress are politicians. They and their appointed staffs are "informed by their political ambitions," and their fates are tied to the electoral process.<sup>9</sup> Politicians work within a system in which powerful interest groups supply a good bit of the money that makes campaigning possible and helps rally the votes that make elections successful. Under these circumstances, how are politicians, confronted by influential lobbies with vested interests abroad, likely to define "national interest"? More often than not, national interest becomes what suits the interests and ambitions of the nation's political leaders *and their most influential supporters*. If this is the case, will elected officials and their political appointees listen to the professional advice of the diplomatic corps if it conflicts with the interests of their influential supporters?<sup>10</sup> The fate of the State Department's Arabists strongly suggests the answer is no.

There are, of course, countries in the world that lack sufficient geopolitical

significance to interest key politicians and their lobby-group supporters. In those cases, the State Department's professionals may well shape policy based on what their expertise tells them is the national interest. However, as the world shrinks, so does the number of places that hold no importance for some American interest group. When it comes to a region such as the Middle East, however, the State Department will have no more capacity to shape final policy than the Department of Interior's petroleum engineers can command policy on Alaskan oil, or the Department of

Agriculture's horticulturists can set farm subsidies. In such cases, policy is intricately tied to politics.

The lobby groups with vested interests in foreign policy may be economic (e.g. oil interests, arms manufactures, large construction concerns and investor groups) or they may be ethnic or religious (e.g. anti-Castro Cubans, Zionist Jews and fundamentalist Christian Zionists).<sup>11</sup> There may sometimes be competing groups that struggle for control over particular policies (Irish-Americans versus those who favor close traditional ties with England, Chinese-Americans who favor Taiwan versus those Americans who wanted to open the China mainland market, Zionist groups versus those who want to sell AWACs to Saudi Arabia, and so on).

No matter what the group, if it is sufficiently well organized and financed and knows how to play for political influence, its parochial interests will ultimately dominate policy and not some ideal national interest.

The more sophisticated interest groups often make an effort to solidify public opinion behind their position by framing their parochial interests as national ones. Not only does this make it easier to gain the help of the Congress and political parties; it also helps obstruct any challenge that might be launched by competing

interest groups. Thus, we often find various lobbies taking the "What is good for General Motors is good for America" approach. On the foreign-policy level, the oft-repeated assertion that Zionist interests in Israel somehow reflect an American national interest is an example of this gambit. Such

rationalizations are, however, exercises in obfuscation. By their very nature, interest groups are bound to promote the "special" interests of their membership. They do not exist to sacrifice those interests to some national greater good.

#### **CREATING A CLOSED INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT**

The United States takes great pride in its free press. So, we can ask, can that

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press be relied upon to supply objective information that will allow Americans to see through the trick of presenting special interests as national interests? The answer, most of the time, turns out to be no. As suggested above, our free press with its automatic reliance on government officials and “reliable experts” is also often a skewed press. It must also be kept in mind that the components of the American media are for-profit businesses owned by individuals and corporations supportive of (or at least responsive to) the very interest groups that seek to maintain the privatized status of aspects of American foreign policy.<sup>12</sup> And, almost all news outlets have financial reasons not to frighten off advertisers by becoming associated with unpopular positions. Thus, America’s mainstream media outlets will usually not give the public all sides of a story.

Therefore, unless a citizen takes the trouble to look for a small number of publications known for their skeptical analysis of government policy and special-interest influence, or to go to the Web to search out similarly skeptical blogs, or to read foreign news sources, one is condemned to a “closed information environment.” However, it is yet another aspect of the provincial nature of the citizenry that most, even when confronted with important events, will feel no need to search for alternative sources of information. Most will feel comfortable with their traditional sources — local newspapers, the better-known news magazines, radio talk shows, and especially television.<sup>13</sup>

A major consequence of this information dependency is that it becomes relatively easy, as Chomsky and Herman put it, to “manufacture consent”<sup>14</sup> by creating pictures of events and situations that may

be biased to favor particular interests. This can be done by consistently presenting and interpreting the news in a certain biased way or by simply leaving out important information judged by editors, owners and financial backers to be undesirable. Nowhere is this practice more evident than in coverage of events in the Middle East.

For instance, the recent coverage of Hamas’s January 2006 electoral victory in Palestine, the February 2005 Hariri assassination in Lebanon and the ongoing Iranian nuclear debate was skewed in this fashion so as to maintain an interpretation of events generally in line with that of neoconservative and Zionist special interests. The mainstream press, whether conservative or liberal, gave background information that emphasized Hamas’s status as a terrorist organization — a fact applauded by pro-Israeli media monitors.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, that is all the background information that most supplied. The Israeli terror that calls forth the Hamas terror was all but left out of the coverage. The party’s pre- and post-election effort to moderate its position on negotiations with Israel was, with rare exceptions, largely ignored. And the contradiction inherent in the U.S. government’s presentation of itself as a champion of democracy in the Middle East, while utterly refusing to recognize the Hamas victory in a fair election with a 73 percent turnout, was mostly missing. Likewise, coverage of the Hariri assassination in Lebanon gave readers what one media monitor called “the hole story.”<sup>16</sup> Using allegations that are yet to be proven, the American press transformed Syria from a state that had maintained stability in Lebanon for 16 years following a prolonged and bloody civil war (a fact rarely mentioned in the

press) into an occupying power brutally trespassing on Lebanon's sovereignty. Finally, American reporting on the issue of Iran's nuclear ambitions also fails to place the controversy in a balanced context. Largely missing from the reporting and analysis, even that which seeks to downplay the alleged Iranian threat, is the fact that Iran might have good reason to feel the need to bolster its defense. The country was invaded by Iraq in the recent past and has been labeled as part of the "Axis of Evil" by President Bush. The Iranians have no doubt noticed (even if the U.S. press has not) that of the three nations so labeled, the only one not invaded or under threat of attack by the United States is the one with the nuclear arsenal (North Korea). This important part of the context has not been given play in the United States.

By presenting such skewed and incomplete pictures, the mainstream media create a public mindset that some scholars have called "low-information rationality,"<sup>17</sup> while others wonder at just what point "low-information rationality becomes no-information irrationality."<sup>18</sup> However you want to characterize it, it is a condition wherein most of the American public cannot understand the real import of the behavior either of alleged adversaries or of their own government. This is, of course, an ideal environment for those lobby groups that wish to have their parochial interests thought of as national interests. It allows the lobbies, in the name of national interest, to encourage the media to demonize those who may stand in the way of their economic or ideological ambitions, or those states (such as Syria and Iran) that are the enemies of their friends (such as Israel). But what happens when there are

unexpected results — when millions of foreigners across the globe start criticizing American behavior, when most Arabs scorn the notion that the United States is an "honest broker" promoting a "peace process" between Israelis and Palestinians, when Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez condemn Yankee imperialism to the delight of multitudes? Finally, what happens when someone flies a jetliner into the World Trade Center? When such events take place, Americans — with their half-baked, slanted news — have no hope of placing these events within an accurate historical context. The resulting bewilderment and resentment, further fed by yet more manipulated information, is then a major cost of an otherwise natural indifference to things that lie beyond the next hill.

#### **OVER THE NEXT HILL: ISRAEL AND THE MIDDLE EAST**

If there is a national interest in the Middle East that should ideally determine U.S. foreign policy, it is continuous *trade-based* access to energy resources. Government policies that unnecessarily complicate or endanger this access would seem illogical or, at the very least, ill-advised. Yet, given the nature of our competitive interest-group democracy, there is no guarantee that what is best for the nation as a whole will actually shape policy. Indeed, for over 60 years, the United States has pursued policies in the Middle East that have systematically alienated nearly the entire Muslim and most of the Christian population of the region.<sup>19</sup>

Among these policies are not only a consistent support for Zionism, but also Washington's cultivation and support of cooperative Middle Eastern dictatorships. Such support (which identifies the United



States with anti-democratic and oppressive behaviors) traded weapons, loans and other “assistance” for economic, political and military cooperation. Washington has seen this policy approach as a way of maintaining “stability” in the region, while simultaneously getting the energy resources we needed and being able to back Israel. This policy required our regional “allies,” such as Mubarak in Egypt, Hussein in Jordan, and the shah in pre-1979 Iran, to, among other things, clandestinely cooperate with Israel and disregard their own citizens’ views on the horrible fate of the Palestinians. Israel and Palestine were not, of course, the only issues that generated discontent with Middle East dictatorships, but in the case of those allied with the United States, it added a particularly explosive issue to the behaviors on which Islamists and other dissenters could build resistance.

This was a short-sighted approach that contributed to a predictable buildup of discontent with not only the dictators but their American supporters, was not a consideration for the interest groups that influenced U.S. policy. No one, beyond a few insightful members of the diplomatic and intelligence corps, seemed to understand (or perhaps cared) that these policies had the real potential to produce a new national interest — the growing need to protect ourselves from those who would express their alienation through acts of violence and terror.

In the oil-producing regions, American administrations have also built policy based on Clark Clifford’s infamous 1948 advice to Harry Truman that the Arabs would sell oil to the United States no matter what America’s other policies were toward the region. Clifford told Truman that “they

(the oil-producing elites) must have oil royalties or go broke.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, one can assume that economics will always work to America’s advantage in the oil-producing countries. Therefore, Washington has little need to pay attention to what Arthur Balfour once referred to as the “desires and prejudices” of Arabs, Iranians, Turks and the other peoples of the Middle East.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Clifford suggested that if the United States took into consideration an Arab point of view on issues such as Zionism and Palestine, it would put itself in the “ridiculous role of trembling before the threats of a few nomadic tribes.”<sup>22</sup> Of course, there have been American diplomats who have tried hard to cultivate good relations with the peoples of the Middle East and create a balanced approach to the region. But, over the decades, they have been increasingly pushed to the margins. As far as American congressmen, senators, party leaders and presidents are concerned, they have, with rare exceptions, followed Clifford’s lead.

Clifford’s advice did not reflect the national interest. Rather, it reflected the special interest of an already powerful American Zionist lobby to which he had strong ties. Since 1948, an entire coterie of groups has come into existence to secure the interests of the state of Israel as if that foreign entity were the fifty-first state of the Union.<sup>23</sup> These allied lobbies now represent more than just a sizable portion of the American Jewish population. They also represent a powerful Christian fundamentalist element that supports Israel for “biblical” reasons.<sup>24</sup>

This collective lobby has sought, with great success, to sustain Israel and its particular “desires and prejudices” as the touchstone of U.S. policy in the Middle

East, whatever the consequences.<sup>25</sup> Sometimes this effort was complicated by Cold War calculations that demanded brief periods in which the United States wooed Arab nationalists such as Gamal Abdel Nasser, and we even have the episode in which President Eisenhower pressured the Israelis out of the Sinai in 1956. However, these policy decisions are actually exceptions to a rule. And, as time has proven, that rule is that Israel's interests must be treated as an American national interest. In order to make this so, U.S. policies have had to work against, and not for, the

democratic expression of the peoples of the Middle East, and in favor of co-optable dictatorships. As long as Israel was a key to policy, it could be no other way, for the peoples of the

region have always been almost unanimously opposed to Israel and its behavior toward the Palestinians. Soon after 1948, they came to associate the United States with that behavior.

Thus, President George W. Bush can talk about democracy all he wants, but unless he is completely out of touch with reality, he is merely spouting propaganda for an American audience.<sup>26</sup> Thanks to more than 60 years of America's special-interest-driven policies, any population in the Middle East that gets a chance at real democracy will almost certainly choose an anti-American government. Some of those governments, in concurrence with the opinions of their citizens, might very well have the backbone to use their energy resources as a political lever to press for a

change in America's uncritical support for Israel and its imperialist approach to the Middle East in general.

The policy of supporting dictatorships and avoiding popular governments in the Middle East has not, of course, produced perfect results. On occasion, some dictators have slipped their leashes (such as Saddam Hussein after 1988) and taken independent stands against Israel. While the Soviet Union existed, it provided support for governments such as Syria, also a dictatorship, to take a stand against the Zionist state. The shah of Iran,

America's dictator, was easily overthrown once an opposition movement was able to organize itself. The new Islamic Republic replaced the shah's embrace of Israel with an

energetic pro-Palestine policy. General Musharaf in Pakistan is facing growing discontent because of his close alliance with the United States. The present Iraqi government, if it can be called that, is dominated by Shiites with strong ties to Iran. The moment either country, Pakistan or Iraq, slips the leash of U.S. influence (and both eventually will), their muted approach toward Israel and Palestine will disappear.

Despite the increasing probability of events taking this direction, American policy has held firm to the position that support for Israel is a vital national interest and thus non-negotiable. A predictable outcome of this insistence that the Zionist lobby's partisan preferences constitute a national interest is that various administra-

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**Policy toward Syria has less to do with its cooperative stand on Iraq and al-Qaeda and more to do with its posture toward Israel.**

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tions and Congress have pursued a punitive policy towards countries that take a stand against Israel — even when they have been otherwise helpful to the United States. Let us take a look at two recent examples of this process.

### **The Case of Syria**

In September 2004, I along with several other academics had an audience with Bashar al-Asad, the president of Syria. Asad detailed some of his recent interactions with the American government. He had met with then-Secretary of State Colin Powell prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. At that meeting, the Syrian president offered his government's good offices to mediate a peaceful resolution of the tensions building between Washington and Baghdad. According to Asad, Powell rejected the offer, stating "peace is not our priority." After the United States invaded Iraq, Asad had Syria maintain a generally cooperative posture toward the United States. It continued to supply, as it had done since the September 11, 2001, attacks, intelligence on Islamic groups hostile to the United States and even received prisoners illegally shipped abroad by Washington for "interrogation." On April 30, 2003, the State Department attested to the fact that "the government of Syria has cooperated significantly with the United States and other foreign governments against al-Qaida, the Taliban and other terrorist organizations and individuals."<sup>27</sup> An April 25, 2005, report issued by weapons inspector Charles Duelfer's Iraq Survey Group cleared Syria of receiving weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) from Iraq. State Department reports affirm that Syria has not aided the insurgency in that country.<sup>28</sup> According to

Asad, when subsequently the United States demanded that Syria close its border with Iraq (a feat to be likened to the United States sealing its border with Mexico), he agreed to try, with the proviso that Washington assist in the effort by supplying Syria with the technical equipment needed to do the job.

At this point, with the United States at war in Iraq, an administration guided by national interest would have pursued a policy aimed at securing Syria's friendship so as to maintain its cooperative stance. Yet that is not what happened. When Asad requested assistance to close his border with Iraq, the Bush administration refused to give it,<sup>29</sup> and Congress began debating not only the maintenance, but the strengthening of sanctions against Syria. It was at that point that Asad realized that, short of becoming a puppet of the U.S. government, there was nothing he could do that would change the Bush administration from foe to friend. Why did Washington behave in such a counterintuitive fashion? The answer lies in the fact that policy toward Syria has less to do with its cooperative stand on Iraq and al-Qaeda and more to do with its posture toward Israel. The Zionist special interests that have privatized U.S. policy toward Syria are not primarily interested in Asad's willingness to close the border with Iraq or supply useful intelligence in the "war on terror." They are first and foremost interested in Syria's support of Hezbollah in Lebanon and that organization's active resistance to Israel. Israel, not Iraq, is the touchstone for American policy toward Syria.

On September 5, 2002, the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) released a working document titled "Working to Secure Israel: The Pro-Israel

Community's Legislative Goals." One of these goals was "to sanction Syria for its continuing support of terrorism."<sup>30</sup> Soon the Syria Accountability Act appeared in Congress and was signed into law by President Bush on December 12, 2003 — *a full seven months after the State Department had lauded Syrian cooperation in the "war on terror."*<sup>31</sup> Thus, sanctions were applied to Syria and are maintained despite the fact that the charges leveled against it in the legislation have either been shown to be untrue or, as in the case of its presence in Lebanon, no longer exist. Subsequently, the House of Representatives has seen renewed efforts to strengthen sanctions and the "Lebanon and Syria Liberation Act" has been introduced. This legislation authorizes "assistance to support a transition to a freely elected, internationally recognized democratic government in Syria."<sup>32</sup> This legislation would clear the way for financing subversive activities against a government that has proven cooperative with the United States on all issues of real national interest, but not on an issue central to the parochial interests of the pro-Israel lobby.

### The Case of Iran

In September 2005, I was among a group that paid a visit to the outgoing Iranian president, Mohammad Khatami. Khatami laid out his efforts to improve relations with the United States. These had taken place during the Clinton presidency and paralleled Khatami's reform efforts in Iran. Khatami was encouraged to approach the United States following a March 2000 talk by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in which she stated that the 1953 CIA-supported coup against democratically appointed Prime

Minister Mohammed Mossadegh "was clearly a setback for Iran's political development." She also admitted that the U.S.-backed regime of the shah had "brutally suppressed political dissent," and that U.S. support for Iraq during its war with Iran was "regrettably shortsighted."<sup>33</sup> Soon after Albright's speech the Iranian president reciprocated with an announcement that, if the United States followed its words with deeds indicating friendship, "we can expect our two countries to enjoy good relations."<sup>34</sup> Bill Clinton seemed to agree that this was an important goal when he told CNN, "One of the best things we could do for the long-term peace and health of the Middle East and, indeed, much of the rest of the world, is to have a constructive partnership with Iran."<sup>35</sup>

Khatami explained to us that the United States and Iran have many mutual interests that go beyond oil: both countries want stability, particularly in Iraq and Afghanistan, and both have a long-term interest in minimizing the influence of religious fanatics (Khatami was referring to Christian and Jewish fanatics as well as Islamic ones). He pointed out that Iran had cooperated with the United States in its efforts against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and was still interested in better relations with America.

Nothing came of these mutual statements that good relations were to be desired. Prior to 2000, the U.S. Congress, working under the assumption that Iran was involved in the June 1996 Khobar truck bombing, and also at the urging of special-interest groups that included the Zionist and expatriate Iranian lobbies, had passed an array of anti-Iranian bills. The most notable of these was the August 1996

Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA). In the same March talk in which Albright admitted mistakes in past U.S. policy toward Iran, she explained that this sanctions bill aimed at two objectives. One was a desire to prevent Iran from developing nuclear technology. It is to be noted that, during Khatami's tenure, the Iranian government had at least worked hard to improve transparency in its effort to develop nuclear energy. The other U.S. goal was to get Iran to stop "financing and supporting terrorist groups, including those violently opposed to the Middle East peace process."<sup>36</sup> This latter goal was a longstanding U.S. demand and referred specifically to Iran's support for Israel's enemies, Hezbollah and Hamas. In other words, Iranian help on issues that an objective observer might see as reflecting American national interest — cooperation in Afghanistan, keeping the Shiite population of Iraq from open rebellion, mutual agreement on the price and dispersal of oil supplies, and even some incremental movement in terms of the nuclear issue — was not sufficient for the establishing of normal relations with the United States. Indeed, shortly after supporting the U.S. ouster of the Taliban regime, the Bush administration labeled Iran a member of the "Axis of Evil." The behavior that seems to have assured Iran's estrangement from the United States was its failure to satisfy the needs of a special-interest lobby within the United States that had managed to privatize the nation's foreign policy on the Arab-Israeli conflict. That same special interest had so distorted how American leaders defined "peace process" that the vast majority of people in the Middle East, including Iran, saw it as something wholly pro-Israel and unjust to

the Palestinians.

Subsequently, Congress and the Bush administration have strengthened sanctions against Iran. In January 2004, the Iran Freedom Support Act was introduced into Congress. This legislation authorizes monies to subvert the Iranian government in ways that resemble the efforts directed against Syria. Now, surrounded by countries that host the troops and bases of a nation (the United States) that openly seeks to overthrow their government, the Iranian authorities are most likely working to obtain nuclear weapons as quickly as possible. From their perspective, possession of such weapons seems to be the best way of preventing an eventual American invasion.

The pro-Israel lobby has, of course, latched onto the issue of Iranian nuclear weapons as a major destabilizing factor in today's Middle East. Both the lobby and the Bush administration ignore Israel's possession of up to 100 nuclear warheads which constitute weapons of mass destruction in the hands of a state that is illegally colonizing Palestinian lands — behavior that an objective observer might well recognize as destabilizing to the region. Nonetheless, on February 17, 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared that Iran, along with its "sidekick Syria," were the ones "destabilizing the Middle East."<sup>37</sup> It goes without saying that she completely ignored not only Israeli behavior in the occupied territories, but America's destabilizing behavior in Iraq as well. Both behaviors further encourage Iran to pursue its nuclear goals.

After President Bush's 2002 "Axis of Evil" State of the Union speech, President Khatami came to the conclusion that American foreign policy had somehow

been captured by a “radical warmonger” element that included America’s pro-Israel lobby.<sup>38</sup> This element was willing to risk war in the Middle East to achieve American military control of parts of the region and also protect Israeli interests.<sup>39</sup> Today, it is hard to disagree with him.

## CONCLUSION

### The Promise of Disaster

The fact that important aspects of our foreign policy have essentially been privatized, and that this has led the United States to pursue increasingly disastrous policies reflecting parochial interests, should be called to public attention. Indeed, it should be made the subject of a national debate. How is foreign policy currently constructed? Whose interests does the process at present serve? What should “national interest” really mean? Is there some obligation that it be tied to “national values”? What are our “national values”? Are they reflected or contradicted by the influential special interests that now shape much of foreign policy? The list of questions that need answers goes on and on.

Unfortunately, for such a debate to take place, the population must leave off its natural inclination both to localism and to reliance on mass-media sources of news. At present, even with cynicism rampant and presidential approval numbers dismally low, most of the traditional information outlets seem uninterested in undertaking any systematic examination of our foreign-policy dilemma and the role special interests play in it. Nor does the average citizen yet look beyond traditional sources of information.

But conditions might change so as to allow a successful demand for a broad review of foreign policy. Unfortunately, that means changing for the worse (for instance, the country finding itself bogged down in multiple wars leading to public outrage over the rapid increase in American casualties), for it seems to be one of the tragedies of the human condition that only disaster produces serious questioning of governments by the general population. Even if things deteriorate in this fashion, the special-interest lobbies that now have such a negative influence on policy can be expected to defend their vested interests with misinformation and obfuscation. Within a “closed information environment” such tactics have worked well for them and may continue to do so. It also should be noted that there are potential disasters that might further entrench the powers that be, rather than calling their policies into question. For instance, the longer present policies are adhered to, the more likely it is that the United States will suffer another 9/11-style attack. That sort of disaster would certainly magnify present anti-Islamic paranoia and allow the Bush administration to shut down all criticism as if it were high treason, while simultaneously mobilizing the nation for further war in the Middle East.

We appear to be trapped in a race to see what sort of disaster will befall the United States first — the type that could likely entrench the powers that be or the type that might stimulate questioning and possible change. One must hope for the latter. Either way, more foreign-policy misfortunes are in the forecast.

<sup>1</sup> George Kennan, *The Cloud of Danger: Current Realities of American Foreign Policy* (Little Brown, 1977), p. 4ff.

<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, this increase in interest seems not to be as large as one would expect. Even in the post 9/11 world, when terrorism, al-Qaeda, and “homeland security” are daily topics of discussion, only 41 percent of American citizens cite these issues as the most important national problems. See James M. Lindsay, “On Foreign Policy, Red and Blue Voters Are Worlds Apart: Commentary on the National Council/Pew Poll.” Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/7259>.

<sup>3</sup> See Alkman Granitsas, “Americans Are Tuning Out the World” in Yale Global On Line, November 24, 2005. <Http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/article.print?id=6553>. For a more optimistic assessment of American attitudes toward foreign affairs see the Public Opinion and Foreign Policy Studies sponsored by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations. Available on the Internet at <http://www.cfr.org/publications/opinion/main.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Granitsas, loc. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>6</sup> As one scholar has put it “...elite political beliefs are in fact more highly structured than those of the general public.” This contributes to the assumption that “the general public will have little or no influence [in shaping foreign policy] and will play a role primarily as the target of elite manipulation.” See Ole Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (University of Michigan Press, 2004, Revised Edition), pp. 127 and 160. For a similar, but far more detailed interpretation of this process, see Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Pantheon Books, 1988), p. 2. They put forth a “propaganda model” to describe that function of the mass media that “filters” the news and relies on “information provided by government, business and ‘experts’ funded and approved by these sources and agents of power.”

<sup>7</sup> In the hotly contested 2004 presidential election, 59.6 percent of eligible voters turned out at the polls. Historically, this was a relatively high percentage for Americans. The country ranks 139<sup>th</sup> out of 172 democratic countries in voter turnout, according to the Federal Election Commission. Winning politicians tend not to bother too much about the percentages of eligible voters who vote. As Tom Stoppard once put it, “it’s not voting that’s democracy, it’s the counting.”

<sup>8</sup> James M. Lindsay, *ibid*.

<sup>9</sup> See Peter Trubowitz, “Domestic Politics Are Gaining Ground in Presidential Foreign Policy Decisions” in *Public Affairs Report*, University of California, Berkeley (Vol. 41, No. 3, May 2000).

<sup>10</sup> The standard studies of American foreign policy tend to see “domestic political conflict” as but one of an array of inputs into the foreign policy process. And some of them assert that the result is a debate that “can facilitate a more thorough consideration of the issues.” See Bruce W. Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy: The Dynamics of Choice in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2000), p. 27. The problem with this assessment is that it assumes a decision maker, standing independent of the interest groups, and capable of objectively assessing conflicting arguments. It also fails to take into consideration the fact that, for all practicable purposes, the debates end when and if one interest group achieves political dominance.

<sup>11</sup> See Tony Smith, *Foreign Attachments: The Power of Ethnic Groups in the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> See “Who Owns the Media?” at <http://www.freepress.net/content/ownership>. The most notorious example is the extensive media and publishing empire of Keith Rupert Murdoch. His News Corporation owns newspapers on three continents and all of them uniformly support the Israeli and neoconservative interpretation of events in the Middle East.

<sup>13</sup> See the 2004 Pew Research Center study of where people get their news in election years. The vast majority rely on TV, news magazines, and a daily newspaper. <Http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=200>. Another important source of information for people is informal personal communication with peer groups. See Richard Carver, “Where Do People Get Their Information?” posted at <http://www.aceproject.org/main/english/me/meb01.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> See footnote 6 above.

<sup>15</sup> See, [http://www.honestreporting.com/articles/45884734/critiques/Media\\_Coverage\\_of\\_Hamas.asp](http://www.honestreporting.com/articles/45884734/critiques/Media_Coverage_of_Hamas.asp)

<sup>16</sup> See Greg Felton, “Hariri Assassination Coverage Gives Readers the Hole Story,” Media Monitors Network, October 27, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> See Ole R. Holsti, *ibid*, p. 322.



<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 323.

<sup>19</sup> See the Zogby International poll report, "How Arabs View America" (June 2004). Speculative talk by some U.S. leaders about developing a pro-American "third way" for Middle East politics (a way leading to something other than oppressive secular dictatorship and Islamic governments) is really beyond America's ability to manufacture. See Shibley Telhami, "In the Middle East, the Third Way Is a Myth" in *The Washington Post*, February 17, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> See Lawrence Davidson, *America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood* (University Press of Florida, 2001), p. 190.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>23</sup> See Richard Curtiss, *Stealth Pacts: How Israel's American Lobby Took Control of U.S. Middle East Policy* (American Educational Trust, 1990).

<sup>24</sup> See Irvine H. Anderson, *Biblical Interpretation and Middle East Policy: The Promised Land, America, and Israel, 1917-2002* (University Press of Florida, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> According to the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, the main, but not only, pro-Israel PAC, AIPAC gave \$2,243,404 to 1,906 candidates during the 2003-2004 election cycle. Between 1978 and 2004, AIPAC has given out \$39,865,672. Actually this has proved an enormously successful investment for, since World War II, the U.S. government has given the State of Israel about \$85 billion in aid. See <http://www.wrmea.com/html/aipac.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Part of the Zogby poll cited in footnote 19 shows that a majority of Arabs do not believe that the U.S. government is really pushing for democracy in their region. They also feel that, since the United States invaded Iraq, the Middle East has become less democratic rather than more so.

<sup>27</sup> See also Seymour Hersh's article, "The Syrian Bet," in *The New Yorker*, July 28, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> A summary of the Survey Group report is posted at [http://democrats.senate.gov/dpc/dpc-printable.cfm?doc\\_name=fs-109-1-21](http://democrats.senate.gov/dpc/dpc-printable.cfm?doc_name=fs-109-1-21).

<sup>29</sup> According to Asma Asad (President Asad's wife, who is active in various reform programs), the American government also prevented U.S. consulting firms from helping Syria privatize parts of its economy that had long been under government control.

<sup>30</sup> [Http://www.aipac.org/documents/AIPACupdate090502.html](http://www.aipac.org/documents/AIPACupdate090502.html). AIPAC rightly claims that it is "consistently ranked as the most influential foreign policy lobbying organization on Capitol Hill." It boasts "85,000 activists throughout the United States" who have only one goal — to maintain and strengthen the relationship between the United States and Israel. Given this single goal and the repeated spying scandals it has produced, one might easily conclude that AIPAC actually functions as an agent of a foreign power.

<sup>31</sup> That Zionist special interest goals match Congressional acts is not a coincidence. As Stephen Steinlight, the recently retired director of National Affairs at the American Jewish Committee puts it, "The great material wealth of the Jewish community will continue to give it significant advantages. We will continue to court and be courted by key figures in Congress. That power is exerted within the political system from the local to national levels through the use of soft money....For perhaps another generation...the Jewish community is thus in a position to divide and conquer and enter into selective coalitions that support our agendas." [Http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Israel/Israel\\_Lobby\\_U.S..html](http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Israel/Israel_Lobby_U.S..html). To this may be added the financial and voter resources put forth by pro-Israel Christian Zionists.

<sup>32</sup> Section 202 of H.R. 1141.

<sup>33</sup> See CNN.com Transcripts posted at [http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0004/19/i\\_ins.00.html](http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0004/19/i_ins.00.html).

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Hooshang Amirahmadi, "The Time is Now," in *The Iranian*. Posted at <http://www.iranian.com/opinion/2000/December/Time/Index.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Loc cit.

<sup>36</sup> CNN.com transcripts, *ibid*.

<sup>37</sup> Testimony given before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

<sup>38</sup> See Khatami's April 27, 2002 interview with *The International Herald Tribune*. Also cited in Agence France Presse, "Khatami Says 'Radical Warmongers' Drive U.S. Policy," April 27, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Loc. Cit.