

By Ray McGovern

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I guess I was naïve in thinking that *The Atlantic* and its American-Israeli writer Jeffrey Goldberg might shy away from arguing for yet another war — this one with Iran — while the cauldrons are still boiling in Afghanistan and Iraq. Even world-classchutzpah must have its limits, I had thought.

I was reflecting on the bizarre ways in which Goldberg helped to make the case for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. For instance, on Oct. 3, 2002, as America's war fever was building just a week before Congress caved to the President, Goldberg wrote in *Slate*, the online magazine:

"The [Bush] administration is planning ... to launch what many people would undoubtedly call a short-sighted and inexcusable act of aggression. In five years, however, I believe that the coming invasion of Iraq will be remembered as an act of profound morality."

Looking back on Goldberg's commentaries at the time also brought to mind how many U.S. publications considered centrist or even liberal were bending over backward to get in line with cheerleaders for the coming invasion.

Even earlier, on March 25, 2002, Goldberg filled the pages of *The New Yorker* with a mammoth 17,000-word story hyping Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's ties to terrorism and glossing over the ambiguities regarding the gassing of civilians in the Kurdish city of Halabja during the Iran-Iraq war.

Goldberg's *magnum opus*, entitled "[The Great Terror](#)," earned him high marks from other neocons and essentially "made" his career. The story was also made to order, so to speak, to support the efforts of President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney to paint

Saddam Hussein as a ruthless dictator who had to be removed.

Presenting Goldberg with an award for the article, the Overseas Press Club saw fit to note that former CIA director James Woolsey described the story as a “blockbuster.” Woolsey, the self-described “anchor of the Presbyterian wing of JINSA (The Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs),” has been a strong advocate for the use of force against any and all perceived enemies of Israel.

Woolsey also was the prime manufacturer and a key disseminator of bogus “intelligence” on the Saddam-al-Qaeda connection. In *The New Yorker* article, while exaggerating Iraq’s links to terrorism, Goldberg quotes Woolsey complaining about the CIA’s alleged aversion to learning about Saddam’s ties to al-Qaeda.

It is a safe bet that Goldberg’s prose under the subhead “The Al-Qaeda Link” was inspired by Woolsey. But it gets worse; the detail in that section came mostly from a drug dealer in a Kurdish prison, whom a British journalist, following up on Goldberg’s reporting, quickly determined to be a “liar.”

### A Friendly Reception

Yet, not surprisingly, Goldberg emerged from his work preparing the PR ground for the U.S. invasion of Iraq as a respected “journalist,” so much so that he was afforded deferential treatment when he made a tour of the cable TV news programs this week promoting his new case for a new war, this time with Iran.

Goldberg had just produced a new *magnum opus* for another prestige journal, *The Atlantic*, entitled “

[The Point of No Return](#),

” explaining Israel’s case for bombing Iran and the reasons why the United States should join in.

On Wednesday, Goldberg easily handled softball questions from MSNBC anchor Andrea Mitchell, who joined in a friendly chat about whether and when the U.S. or Israel or both should

opt for what Mitchell described as a “military response” to the “Iranian nuclear threat.” Goldberg claimed that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu sees the challenge from Iran as being on a par with the Holocaust, believing that Iran is bent on the destruction of Israel with its 6 million people.

“Are you persuaded that Israel would take action against Iran unilaterally?” asked Mitchell. “Yes, I am; I am,” Goldberg responded.

Goldberg added that he believes that President Barack Obama is not prepared to live with a nuclear Iran but that it remains an open question whether he would take military action to prevent that eventuality. Goldberg said Obama “probably” would not. And that being the case, Goldberg thought Netanyahu would be inclined to unleash Israeli forces unilaterally and absorb any damage this might do to bilateral relations with Washington.

At the end of the interview, Mitchell lofted a fat change-up for which Goldberg seemed well prepared. When, she asked, will Obama finally visit Israel? In response, Goldberg said he would share a “secret.” He expressed concern lofted what appeared to be a canned question and, in response, Goldberg seemed downright eager to share what he called a “secret,” as he put it.

Mitchell asked when Obama planned to visit Israel. Goldberg expressed concern: *“The Israelis are worried about Obama coming; they don’t want him to be boo-ed wherever he goes; that’s the last thing they need. Obama is not popular in Israel in the way Bush and Clinton were.”*

The unmistakable message: An Obama tour of Israel could be an ugly affair, unless Obama gets more in step with Netanyahu’s tune in the interim.

Chatting with Wolf

Goldberg walked through a similar discussion on the merits of war when he appeared on CNN, a guest of Wolf Blitzer’s “The Situation Room.”

Goldberg: “The question is what can the Obama administration do to stop the Iranians from pursuing the nuclear program ... it seems unlikely to me at this point that Iran is simply going to say, because President Obama asks, you know, we’re going to end our nuclear program.”

Blitzer: “You have concluded that an Israeli air strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities is — in your word — a near certainty?”

Goldberg: “Well, it’s a near certainty, in the long term, but even in the next year I give it a 50 percent or better chance. Next year, meaning by next July.”

### Who Gassed?

The fact that many civilians were gassed as Iraqi and Iranian forces clashed on March 16, 1988, in the area of Halabja, just barely inside Iraq’s border with Iran, is beyond dispute. However, what is not clear is the blockbuster charge that it was the Iraqis, rather than the Iranians, who used the deadly chemical warfare agents. The U.S. government has pointed the finger in both directions, often depending on which side of the conflict Washington was tilting toward.

A joint CIA and Defense Intelligence assessment focused in on the “blood agents (cyanogen chloride) deemed responsible for most of the deaths in Halabja and determined that the Iraqis had no history of using those particular agents, but that the Iranians did.

That particular CIA-DIA report concluded that, despite the conventional wisdom, “the Iranians perpetrated this attack.” Dr. Stephen Pelletiere, a senior CIA analyst on Iraq during its war with Iran, told Roger Trilling of the *Village Voice* that he is one among many who believe that Goldberg’s account of the killings at Halabja was wrong and that the issue was far from academic.

Pelletiere said: “*We say Saddam is a monster, a maniac who gassed his own people, and the*

*world shouldn't tolerate him. But why? Because that's the last argument the U.S. has for going to war with Iraq."*

It may well have been the most emotionally riveting argument, I suppose.

## Debunking the Junk

But what about Iraq's alleged WMDs and supposed ties between Iraq and al-Qaeda? Goldberg made an attempt to include those canards as well, focusing mostly on chemical and biological warfare agents. (He left to the *New York Times*' Judith Miller, who was later fired, and Michael Gordon, who is still chief military correspondent, to do the heavy lifting for the lies about Iraq's supposed nuclear weapons.)

A final story about Jeffrey Goldberg's pre-Iraq-invasion stories: Just a week before Congress bowed to Bush's request for war authorization against Iraq, Goldberg was writing in *Slate* about the dangers of "aflatoxin," which he had cited 15 times in his *New Yorker* article.

"Aflatoxin does only one thing well," Goldberg wrote. "It causes liver cancer. In fact, it induces it particularly well in children."

However, Goldberg's obsession with "aflatoxin" didn't stand up too well after the U.S.-led invasion found no evidence that Iraq still had bio-weapons stockpiles. Regarding aflatoxin, Charles Duelfer, the Bush administration's chief weapons inspector in Iraq, concluded that there was "no evidence to link those tests [of aflatoxin] with the development of biological weapons agents for military use."

Ken Silverstein of *Harper's*, among the more serious journalists who have had macabre fun critiquing Goldberg's contribution to the Iraq War effort, composed "

[Goldberg's War](#)  
," one of the best critiques.

Silverstein wrote:

“Whatever Saddam’s regime intended to do with the aflatoxin ... it did not involve wholesale tot-slaughter. But it seems to me that Goldberg was out to prove that Saddam was singularly evil — a man who would kill kids using cancer, no doubt cackling with glee as he watched them expire — because the American public might be less willing to support a war if he was merely an evil dictator, which are a dime a dozen.”

But who is Jeffrey Goldberg and how did he achieve such influence, helping to create the false conventional wisdom that sleepwalked the American people into war with Iraq and is now pointing toward a new war with Iran.

For a 44-year-old writer, Goldberg surely has been around. He left college to move to Israel where he served with the Israeli army as a prison guard at the Ketziot military prison camp during the First Intifada; he also wrote for *The Jerusalem Post*.

Upon his return to the U.S., he worked for the Jewish daily *Forward* and eventually got hired by *The New Yorker*. Now, he’s a star writer for *The Atlantic*.

Pitching for War

Goldberg’s mission this time? Pitching war with Iran.

This time, Goldberg and the Israelis want us to buy into a syllogism without a valid major premise. Their argument presupposes that Iran has made the decision to develop nuclear weapons and is hard at work on such a program, which is what they want Americans to believe whether there’s evidence or not.

The Fawning Corporate Media (FCM) and the neocons who brought us the war on Iraq, and occasionally the President himself, speak as though Iran has restarted work on the nuclear weapons part of their nuclear energy program. This internal government debate (and the external propaganda) is a replay of three years ago, when the FCM succeeded in convincing most Americans that Iran either had nuclear weapons or was on the verge of getting them.

President Bush and Vice President Cheney were out in front hyping the danger, whipping the American people into another war frenzy -- when an honest National Intelligence Estimate stopped them in their tracks.

Two things saved the day: integrity and fear:

Integrity on the part of analysts who, after the corruption before the Iraq War, were able to revert to the tell-it-like-it-is-without-fear-or-favor ethos that obtained during my 27 years as a CIA analyst; and fear on the part of the senior U.S. military that Cheney and Bush were about to order them to commit U.S. forces to war with Iran.

The integrity played out during work on a congressionally mandated National Intelligence Estimate that it took almost all of 2007 to complete. Most of those intelligence officials who had “fixed” the intelligence on Iraq had been given the heave-ho.

New leadership was installed under the direction of a non-corruptible Director of the National Intelligence Council, Tom Fingar, from the State Department.

Under Fingar, intelligence analysts rose to the occasion on the delicate issue of Iran’s nuclear development program by performing a bottom-up assessment. There would be no “fixing” of intelligence around the policy. Main question: Had Iran decided to go for the bomb?

The NIE’s first sentence conveyed the unanimous conclusion of all 16 U.S. intelligence agencies: *“We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons*

*program; we also assess with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons.”*

### Fearing Another War

Fear now came into play and, for once, played a salutary role. Fear is simply a by-product of a sane appraisal of what war with Iran would mean. The senior U.S. military had enough good sense to be afraid and saw the NIE as an opportunity to stop the juggernaut toward war.

And so, they and those in Congress who had commissioned the NIE insisted that its key judgments be declassified and made public, despite an earlier publicly announced decision by the Director of National Intelligence not to do so.

Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen and CENTCOM commander William “Fox” Fallon had been living in fear of a Cheney-inspired order to commit U.S. forces to war with Iran. Fallon actually had told retired Col. Patrick Lang, a few months before Fallon was cashiered, “We are not going to do Iran on my watch.”

Fear? Yes, fear — an altogether sensible reaction. No commander worth his salt looks with equanimity at the prospect of being on the receiving end of an order that could decimate his troops and lead to a wider war for which his forces would not be adequate. On a more personal basis, no commander wants to be faced with a choice between having to resign on principle on the one hand and carrying out an order he knows to be fatefully misguided on the other.

Thankfully, in the wake of the 2007 Estimate, good sense prevailed, despite Cheney’s strong objections. Bush sent Mullen to Israel in June 2008 with instructions to warn the Israelis in no uncertain terms not to provoke war with Iran with any expectation that the U.S. would pull their chestnuts out of the fire.

Fast forward to the present. Where is Iran now in its nuclear program?



When an important National Intelligence Estimate needs updating, the art form often chosen is what is called a “Memorandum to Holders” — in the case at hand, holders of the original NIE of November 2007.

Such a paper need not repeat the bottom-up research and analysis completed immediately prior to November 2007; it simply requires a close look at evidence acquired from the end of 2007 to the present to determine whether there is reason to change the key judgments of three years ago.

Pressure to Rewrite?

We hear nothing from our sources about any substantial change in the evidence over the past three years. That is not what the Goldbergs and other neocons of this world want to hear, and this presumably is why the Memorandum to Holders has been held up for months and months. Not a good sign.

Authoritative statements for the record have been sparse but reassuring, inasmuch as they seem to confirm the 2007 NIE's key judgments. Congressional testimony in February by then-Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair, and in April by the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs revealed no major developments. Moreover, Blair consistently hewed to the 2007 judgment that Iran's eventual decision on whether or not to build a nuclear weapon can still be influenced by "the international community."

Scattered statements by other high officials, including President Obama, sometimes convey a sense that Iran is again working toward a nuclear weapon, and the FCM has been leaving hints left and right that this is the case.

Folks like Jeffrey Goldberg refer casually, but intentionally, to “Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons.”

The neocons seem to be as strong now as under George W. Bush, with their Real-Men-Go-to-Tehran-type macho undiminished.

Can integrity trump macho this time? Without a strong man at the helm in the intelligence community, it will be very difficult. And the administration let drop months ago that this time the key judgments of the Memorandum to Holders will not be made public.

Meanwhile, Goldberg and his neocon colleague flaks are trying to create as much pressure as they can on Obama to produce a scarier Estimate ... or to delay the one in progress *sine die*. The situation would seem even bleaker were it not for the availability of WikiLeaks and other non-FCM news outlets that would be ready and willing to publish documents about what is actually going on behind the scenes.

It is a safe bet that there are enough folks with access to the Memorandum to Holders drafts to recognize swiftly any attempt to corrupt honest judgments.

Some government officials will probably be able to recognize their own conscience, their integrity and their oath to protect and defend the Constitution against all enemies, foreign and domestic, as values that properly supersede other promises — like the promise not to release classified information that is a condition of employment.

Those who are tempted to exaggerate the threat from Iran will, at least, have to take into account how relatively easy it has become to evade the FCM's gatekeepers and expose government dishonesty to the people.