

Nikki Haley: Neocon Heartthrob

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With the eviction of Steve Bannon and Sebastian Gorka from the inner precincts of the White House and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson besieged and taking fire from virtually all sides, neoconservatives – even the NeverTrumpers among them – must be quietly harboring renewed hopes that their restoration may soon be within reach.



Haley at the CFR, naturally!

And, as should become clear Tuesday, those hopes reside largely with the Trump administration's ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, who's been on a tear against Iran for several weeks now. Her campaign culminated recently in her unsubstantiated claims—in contradiction to the most recent findings of her own State Department and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), not to mention Washington's P5+1 partners—that Tehran is not in full compliance with the two-year-old Iran nuclear deal, otherwise known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Why Tuesday? Because Haley will give a formal policy address on Iran policy at Neocon Central, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). That's the same "think tank" that acted as the Bush administration's principal cheerleader for the 2003 Iraq invasion and provided the Pentagon with a number of its "scholars" as consultants to put together the totally failed strategy that followed Washington's conquest of Baghdad. Who can forget the machismo-filled "black coffee briefings"—featuring the likes of then-Defense Policy Committee chair Richard Perle, serially mistaken Iran "experts" Michael Rubin, Michael Ledeen, and Reuel Marc Gerecht (the last two now with the Foundation for Defense of Democracies), and former CIA director James Woolsey—that bolstered the propaganda blitz about Saddam Hussein's alleged ties to al-Qaeda, his enormous WMD factories, his fast-developing nuclear weapons program, and the gratitude which we should all feel toward the tremendous sacrifices and promise of Ahmad Chalabi as the George Washington of Iraq? If ever there was a highly developed "echo chamber" for going to war in modern U.S. foreign policy, it was AEI that provided the initial shouting points. All of that makes the title of Haley's impending address, "Beyond the Echo Chamber: Considerations on U.S. Policy Toward Iran," especially ironic, not to say ominous.

Haley, who has hardly been camera-shy since her appointment and will no doubt get an additional media boost from her demands Monday that the UN Security Council take much stronger action against North Korea following its latest nuclear test, clearly has her eyes set on higher office, no doubt including the presidency itself. As the country's most influential national-security reporter, The New York Times' David Sanger, noted just a few days ago, she appears to be the front-runner to

succeed an increasingly beleaguered and publicity- and media-averse Tillerson should he or Trump decide that it's not worth his sticking around. A total foreign-policy novice just eight months ago, Haley could soon find herself running U.S. foreign policy, at least to the extent that the State Department remains a factor in the policy-making compared to the Pentagon and the White House itself.

A Darling of the Neocons

As noted by Phil Weiss in April, Haley had become been a darling of the neocons well before she arrived at Turtle Bay. Part of the credit or blame belongs to her close ties to fellow South Carolinian Sen. Lindsay Graham, long a neoconservative favorite for his staunch defense of Israel, belligerence toward Iran and Russia, and chronic interventionist instincts, especially as regards the U.S. military. It's not coincidental that her most influential adviser, by all accounts, is David Glaccum, who served for years as Graham's chief counsel.

Not coincidentally, however, neocon hopes may lie as well with the generous political funding provided to Haley by Sheldon Adelson, the GOP's and Trump's single biggest donor.

Between May and June, 2016, Sheldon Adelson contributed \$250,000 to Haley's 527 political organization, A Great Day, funds that she used to target four Republican state senate rivals in primaries. (Only one was successfully defeated.) Adelson was the largest contributor to her group, which raised a total of \$915,000. The next largest donor, Koch Industries, contributed \$50,000.

Perhaps Adelson gained an unusual interest in South Carolina's state senate, but it seems more likely the investment was a show of support for Haley's hawkish pro-Israel positions. Adelson, who is also the largest donor to the extreme right-wing Zionist Organization of America (ZOA), has long pushed stridently anti-Iran positions, suggesting in late 2013 that Washington detonate a nuclear weapon in Iran's territory unless Tehran complied with demands that it completely abandon its nuclear program.

And, as Weiss wrote, Haley had come through for Adelson already in 2015, when she signed without any reservation the first law against boycotts of Israel— about the same time as Adelson convened an anti-BDS summit in Las Vegas.

Courting AIPAC

Although she reiterated support for the eventual, if hypothetical, creation of a Palestinian state in February when Trump himself put that traditional position very much in doubt, her tenure at the UN has been characterized by staunch support for Israel against virtually any criticism. At the annual policy conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in March she became the "belle at the ball," as Weiss put it, by serving up the kind of red meat that gets them going:

I wear heels. It's not for a fashion statement. It's because if I see something wrong, we're going to kick them every single time. So how are we kicking? We're kicking by, number one, putting everybody on notice, saying that if you have our back—we're going to have the backs of our friends, but our friends need to have our back too. If you challenge us, be prepared for what you're challenging us for, because we will respond.

The next thing we did was we said, the days of Israel-bashing are over. We have a lot of things to talk about. There are a lot of threats to peace and security. But you're not going to take our number one democratic friend in the Middle East and beat up on them.

And I think what you're seeing is they're all backing up a little bit. The Israel-bashing is not as loud. They didn't know exactly what I meant outside of giving the speech, so we showed them.

So when they decided to try and put a Palestinian [former Palestinian Authority Prime Minister and Bush administration favorite Salam Fayyad] in one of the highest positions [Special Envoy to Libya] that had ever been given at the U.N., we said no and we had him booted out. That doesn't mean he wasn't a nice man. That doesn't mean he wasn't good to America. What it means is, until the Palestinian Authority comes to the table, until the U.N. responds the way they're supposed to, there are no freebees for the Palestinian Authority anymore.

So then they tested us again. And a ridiculous report, the Falk Report, came out. I don't know who the guy is or what he's about, but he's got serious problems. Goes and compares Israel to an apartheid state. So the first thing we do is we call the secretary general and say, this is absolutely ridiculous. You have to pull it. The secretary general immediately pulled the report. And then the director has now resigned.

Last thing. So for anyone that says you can't get anything done at the U.N., they need to know there's a new sheriff in town.

You get the picture. It's the kind of attitude that one heard a lot at those "black coffee briefings."

Since then, Haley has made attacking Tehran at the world body—even making a special trip to Vienna with the apparent intention to press the IAEA to make demands of Iran that go beyond the letter of the JCPOA—a top priority. Only the escalating crisis over missile launches and nuclear tests by North Korea—a nation that, in contrast to Iran, actually has nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them—has consumed more of her attention. And, consistent with her actions as governor, she has most recently threatened to slash U.S. funding to—and possibly withdraw from—the UN Human Rights Council if it follows through on its mandate to publish a list of international companies that do business with Jewish settlements on the West Bank by the end of the year.

Romancing AEI

Like the "black coffee briefings" of yore, AEI's public programs ordinarily involve panel discussions or, perhaps, one featured speaker followed by comments by selected discussants. Single-speaker events speeches are usually reserved for important annual occasions, like the presentation of the Irving Kristol Award dinners to such recent winners as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (2015 – when he was actively campaigning against the JCPOA), David Petraeus (2010), and Iraq War booster Bernard Lewis (2007 shortly after he predicted that Iran would launch a nuclear attack on Israel on Aug 22, 2016). Dick Cheney, a member of AEI's board of trustees, has been accorded the platform there on a number of occasions, most recently in September 2015 at the height of the congressional debate over the JCPOA, which he denounced in the strongest terms, suggesting that war with Tehran might be a better option. Indeed, that occasion was the last one in which a single speaker at AEI devoted an entire remarks to Iran. Haley will now follow in his path, albeit as an incumbent U.S. official.

But perhaps the most memorable of the single-speech events at AEI was a fierce attack delivered by Newt Gingrich one month into the Iraq invasion on the State Department for gross incompetence, especially compared to the military. The former House speaker, who was also a member of the Defense Policy Board chaired by AEI's Perle and an AEI fellow at the time, clearly used the occasion

to campaign for secretary of state to replace the increasingly hapless Colin Powell, then a victim of a Cheney-Rumsfeld “cabal,” as Powell’s long-time chief of staff, Col. Larry Wilkerson put it, that, with AEI’s help, led the charge to war within the administration. The speech was considered so over the top that it ultimately backfired against Gingrich, who was reduced to uncharacteristic silence, particularly after Powell’s deputy, Richard Armitage, tartly observed, “It is clear that Mr. Gingrich is off his meds and out of therapy.”

Haley will not likely make the same mistake, but it’s a precedent worth bearing in mind. After all, Adelson spent \$15 million on Gingrich’s failed 2012 presidential campaign.

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