

Hitler 1938, Cheney 2007?

by Jeffrey Steinberg

On Sept. 12, 1938, Adolf Hitler delivered a speech before a Nazi Party gathering in Nuremberg, belittling news reports that he was preparing an invasion of Czechoslovakia. Hitler lied that he had nothing but the greatest respect for the Czechoslovak people. His problem was only with the regime of the President of Czechoslovakia, Eduard Benes. Hitler demanded that Czechoslovakia surrender control over the heavily German-populated Sudetenland region, but forswore military action. For a few days, the world naively breathed a sigh of relief that war had been averted; this, despite the fact that on Sept. 10, in reply to a speech by President Benes appealing for calm and peace, Nazi official Hermann Göring had railed against the Czechs, “This miserable pygmy race without culture, no one knows where it came from, is oppressing a cultured people [Sudeten Germans], and behind it is Moscow and the eternal mask of the Jew devil.”

On Sept. 15, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain flew to Germany to meet with Hitler at Berchtesgaden, to signal that the British would support Hitler’s demand that the Sudetenland be turned over to Germany.

On Sept. 26, U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt wrote to Hitler and Benes, urging them to reach a peaceful settlement of the Sudetenland conflict. Hitler refused to allow any American mediation, made other threatening gestures, but, again, asserted, in a speech in the Munich Sportpalast, that he had no interest in any further territorial gains (on March 12, German troops had crossed into Austria, and occupied the country, declaring that German-speaking Austria was now, under the *Anschluss* (annexation), a province of the Third Reich, to be called Ostmark).

Three days later, on Sept. 29, Chamberlain flew to Munich, this time accompanied by French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier. The next day, Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Chamberlain, and Daladier signed the Munich Pact, endorsing Hitler’s

annexation of the Sudetenland, without even consulting with the Czechoslovak government. When Chamberlain returned to London, with the friendship treaty in hand, he infamously announced from 10 Downing Street, “My good friends, this is the second time in our history that there has come back from Germany to Downing Street, peace with honour. I believe it is peace for our time.”

The very next day, on Oct. 1, Hitler’s army entered the Sudetenland, and was greeted by pro-Nazi Sudeten separatist leader Konrad Henlein, whose SS-trained militia had staged one provocation after another against the Benes government for the past year. President Benes resigned, and within days, Czechoslovakia no longer existed, having been divided up among Germany, Hungary, and Poland.

Between 1936 and 1939, Hitler had alternated between provocations and apparent concessions, exploiting the wishful thinking of many world leaders, who believed that they could halt the Führer’s march to war, even after the conquest of Austria and Czechoslovakia. It was only with the Sept. 1, 1939 invasion of Poland (Hitler concocted a pretext, claiming that German troops had been fired on by Polish units), that Great Britain and France finally declared war on Germany.

Do the lessons of World War II have any bearing on today’s ongoing showdown in the Persian Gulf? Is the “War Party” inside the Bush Administration, headed by Vice President Dick Cheney, borrowing a page from Hitler’s 1936-39 playbook, carefully orchestrating a near-term war with Iran? Recent events, when viewed through the lens of history, suggest that this may be precisely what is going on.

Cheney Aboard the USS Stennis

On May 11, 2007, Associated Press writer Tom Raum reported from the deck of the *USS John C. Stennis*, “From an aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf, Vice President Dick Cheney

warned Iran today the United States and its allies will keep it from restricting sea traffic as well as from developing nuclear weapons.” Raum quoted the Vice President: “We’ll keep the sea lanes open. . . . We’ll stand with others to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons and dominating this region. . . . It’s not easy to serve in this part of the world. It’s a place of tension and many conflicts. . . . We’ll stand with our friends in opposing extremism and strategic threats. We’ll disrupt attacks on our own forces.”

Twelve days later, on May 23, nine U.S. warships, carrying 17,000 sailors, Marines, and Navy pilots, sailed into the Persian Gulf. Two U.S. aircraft carriers, the *USS Nimitz* and the *USS Stennis*, crossed through the narrow Strait of Hormuz, off the coast of Iran. It was the largest daytime U.S. naval deployment in the Persian Gulf since the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. According to official U.S. Navy statements about the large maneuvers, the decision to send two carrier groups into the strait was made at the last moment, to send an unambiguous signal about U.S. intentions to secure the Persian Gulf. Rear Adm. Kevin Quinn, the group leader on board the *USS Stennis*, told reporters, “What is special about this is that you have two strike groups. Everybody will see us, because it is in daylight. There is always the threat of any state, or non-state actor, that might decide to close one of the international straits, and the biggest one is the Strait of Hormuz.”

The combination of Cheney’s bellicose public language (according to Israeli news accounts, Cheney informed Gulf Cooperation Council heads of state, including Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah, that President Bush had determined that if Iran refuses to forgo a nuclear weapons capability, the United States will attack its nuclear, military, and economic infrastructure before he leaves the White House in January 2009), and the flagrant show of U.S. naval force in the Gulf, triggered widespread fears that the United States was committed to yet another misadventure in Southwest Asia, one that could trigger world war.

Stop the ‘New Crazyies’

Yet, on May 28, less than a week after the Strait of Hormuz maneuvers, the United States and Iran had their first official, bilateral diplomatic talks in 27 years. The meeting, between U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker and Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad Hassan Kazemi Qomi, had been arranged at the May 3-4, 2007 regional summit meeting at the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. The four-hour meeting between Crocker, Qomi, and Iraq’s National Security chief, Mowaffak al-Rubaie, focussed on the Iraq crisis, and possible areas of convergent interest between Washington and Tehran, which both support the Shi’ite majority government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Ambassador Qomi described the meeting in positive terms: “The two sides dealt with the issues in a very frank and transparent and clear way. The views of both sides were unified and identical on the question of the security issue.” Am-

bassador Crocker was only slightly less upbeat: “There was pretty good congruence right down the line—support for a secure, stable, democratic, federal Iraq, in control of its own security, at peace with its neighbors.”

Yet, no sooner had the talks been briefed back to senior officials in Tehran and Washington, but top aides to Vice President Cheney, led by his Deputy National Security Advisor, David Wurmser, put out the word to Washington think-tanks and neo-conservative pundits to report that Cheney considered the diplomatic approach to Iran to be a dead letter.

Wurmser’s actions drew immediate fire from Dr. Mohammed ElBaradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), who, in an interview with BBC on June 1, said that he did not want to see a new regional war erupt in the Persian Gulf. “You do not want to give additional argument to new crazies who say, ‘let’s go and bomb Iran.’ I wake up every morning and see 100 Iraqis, innocent civilians, are dying.” Dr. ElBaradei insisted that it is impossible to “bomb knowledge,” arguing that Iran should be allowed to maintain a small-scale uranium enrichment program, under strict IAEA guidelines and inspections. Asked to further identify the “new crazies,” the UN official described them as “those who have extreme views and say the only solution is to impose our will by force.”

European diplomats interviewed by the *New York Times* on June 1 voiced worry about Cheney’s frequent references to “red lines,” meaning the point at which Iran has all the technical know-how to build a nuclear bomb. The unnamed European diplomats told the *Times* that they believed that Cheney, unlike the State Department, was pushing the idea that Iran was on the verge of having a bomb, and that only U.S. military strikes could stop them. “We fully believe that Foggy Bottom is committed to the diplomatic track, but there’s some concern about the Vice President’s office,” they said.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, from Madrid, Spain, tried to damage-control the Wurmser/Cheney antics, by telling reporters that Cheney is on board with the diplomatic approach. “The President of the United States has made it clear that we are on a course that is a diplomatic course,” she claimed. “That policy is supported by all of the members of the Cabinet, and by the Vice President of the United States.”

Yet, the same *New York Times* account of Rice’s comments noted, “In interviews, people who have spoken with Cheney’s staff confirmed that some of the hawkish statements to outsiders had been made by David Wurmser, a former Pentagon official who is now the principal deputy assistant to Cheney for national security affairs.”

The same day that the Cheney-ElBaradei flap was occurring, the *Wall Street Journal* published a blunt opinion piece by Norman Podhoretz, the dean of the neo-conservative movement and the father-in-law of senior Bush National Security Council official Elliott Abrams. The Podhoretz article, “The Case for Bombing Iran—I Hope and Pray That President Bush Will Do It,” stated unequivocally: “Since a ground

invasion of Iran must be ruled out for many different reasons, the job would have to be done, if it is to be done at all, by a campaign of air strikes. Furthermore, because Iran's nuclear facilities are dispersed, and because some of them are underground, many sorties and bunker-busting munitions would be required. And because such a campaign is beyond the capabilities of Israel, and the will, let alone the courage, of any of our other allies, it could be carried out only by the United States. Even then, we would probably be unable to get at all the underground facilities, which means that, if Iran were still intent on going nuclear, it would not have to start over again from scratch. But a bombing campaign would without question set back its nuclear program for years to come, and might even lead to the overthrow of the mullahs."

Revolt of the U.S. Generals

To be certain, there is strong opposition to the Cheney position, that diplomacy with Iran has already run its course (just days after the first official diplomatic meeting between American and Iranian officials in 27-years!). Active duty U.S. military commanders, including Adm. William Fallon, the Com-

mander-in-Chief of the Central Command, are firmly on record as opposed to a confrontation with Iran. Recently, Admiral Fallon banned the use of the term "Islamofascism" within his command, and petitioned Washington to recall one of the U.S. Naval carrier groups from the Gulf before the arrival of the *USS Stennis*, so as to avoid an even greater and more provocative concentration of naval power in the Gulf.

Nevertheless, with the stability of President George W. Bush's state of mind a subject of great doubt; with Dick Cheney still commanding a powerful perch within the White House; with Cheney acolyte William Luti, former overlord of the Office of Special Plans Pentagon war propaganda shop, now the Executive Director of the National Security Council; and with Elliott Abrams openly defying Secretary of State Rice and pronouncing her "all process and no substance" in front of a collection of right-wing Jewish Republicans—with not so much as a slap on the wrist from the higher-ups—the historical parallels must be kept in mind. So long as Dick Cheney is in the Vice Presidency, the clock to Munich continues to tick, and those looking for signs of "peace for our time" will run the risk of history repeating itself—on their watch.