

Sane Officers Oppose Cheney

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The Pentagon has launched a preventive strike against a target that military chiefs presumably regard as one of the most active current threats to U.S. and world security — namely, the office of the vice president of the United States. Thrusting back hard against Vice President Dick Cheney's warmongering, the head of U.S. forces in the Mideast declared that an attack on Iran "is not in the offing," and more or less urged the vice president and his political allies to shut up.

In a front-page interview published on Nov. 12 by the Financial Times, Admiral William Fallon, who heads the U.S. Central Command, spoke in diplomatic tones, as top military officers usually tend to do when they make strong political statements. Yet there was no mistaking the admiral's message. While Iran certainly poses a "challenge," he said, U.S. policymakers must engage Tehran to encourage changes in the regime's behavior. But the Iranians won't "come to their senses" while under threat of bombardment, invasion or worse. "None of this is helped by the stories that just keep going around and around and around that any day now there will be another war, which is just not where we want to go," he said with a degree of exasperation. "It seems to me that we don't need more problems. It astounds me that so many pundits and others are spending so much time yakking about this topic [of war against Iran]."

Most of that bellicose speculation can be traced back to vice presidential circles, including the neoconservative ideologues (or as the admiral put it, the "pundits"), who popularized the notions that Iran is an imminent threat to the United States, Israel and the world and that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is the next Hitler. Those themes certainly have a familiar ring; the last imminent threat was Iraq, and the last next Hitler was Saddam Hussein. Not content with the great success of their Mesopotamian misadventure, the same people have been urging action against Iran.

Admiral Fallon's remarks follow in the wake of recent statements by both President George W. Bush and Vice President Cheney. Not long ago, the president blurted a strange warning that if other nations wish to avert "World War III," then they had best ensure that Iran never obtains "the knowledge" to construct nuclear weapons. "We will not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon," growled the vice president, muttering about the "serious consequences" that the Iranians would suffer. Since nobody believes that Tehran will come close to acquiring a nuclear weapon before the Bush administration leaves office, the ominous comments were taken as signals that the White House is contemplating preemptive action. Those signals have emanated for years from the office of the vice president and those associated with him.

More important, the nation's military leaders seem determined to block any rush to war, no matter what the vice president may desire. The Joint Chiefs of Staff have reportedly expressed strong opposition to any military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, and little enthusiasm for even limited action against Iranian forces. Their reluctance stems from tactical concerns about the impact of conflict with Iran on U.S. forces in Iraq, and strategic worries over waging wars in three Muslim nations in the region simultaneously.

For now, the influence of sane and sensible officers appears to be ascending. Only a few days before Admiral Fallon spoke out, an Associated Press dispatch noted that American officials are quietly reducing our force profile in the Gulf region — for instance, by withdrawing an aircraft carrier that was sent earlier this year to emphasize the American regional security commitment.

As for President Bush, if his own words are to be believed, then he too has decided to pursue the diplomatic option rather than engage in reckless bombing. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has explicitly rejected the idea that the Senate authorized war last September by designating the Iranian Revolutionary Guard as a "terrorist organization." She went on to say "the president has also made very clear that he's on a diplomatic path where Iran comes into focus."

If calmer counsel is prevailing, however, tensions are certain to rise again when the U.S. moves for United Nations sanctions against Tehran. It would not take much to provoke fire on either side, which is why rhetorical tone is so important. "You certainly don't want to encourage any kind of a miscalculation or misstep by talk," said Admiral Fallon, who seems to understand how swiftly foolish fantasies of war can be transformed into lethal realities.

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