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White House Narratives on the Iran Nuclear Deal

Chairman Chaffetz, Ranking Member Cummings, members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to address some of the problems raised by the recent profile in *The New York Times Magazine* of Ben Rhodes, the deputy national security advisor for strategic communication. Rhodes and key members of his staff openly admitted to David Samuels, the author of the article, that they built a campaign-style war room manned by approximately two-dozen staffers drawn from the State Department, Treasury, and the Department of Defense. The war room monitored the discussion of the Iran nuclear deal—in the traditional press, on social media, in Congress, and in the policy world—and supplied sympathetic reporters with stories, official and unofficial, that supported the goals of the Obama administration. Simultaneously, Rhodes built up a network of surrogates among NGOs and think tanks who provided the media with seemingly independent verification of those stories. “We created an echo chamber,” Rhodes said. “They were saying things that validated what we had given them to say.”¹

Rhodes reportedly bristled when Samuels suggested that the war room and echo chamber were tools of deception. In my view, however, Rhodes did indeed assist the president in deceiving the American people. In order to understand the precise nature of that deception, we must first describe the broad policy context in which the war room and echo chamber operated.

The Iran nuclear deal, we can now see, was but the most visible piece of a much larger policy—namely, rapprochement with Iran as a means of furthering American disengagement from the Middle East. That President Obama has always been dedicated to pulling the United States back from the region is hardly a secret; no serious observer ever doubted for a moment that the president was pursuing a policy of retrenchment. But many well-informed people failed to see just how far his strategy deviated from mainstream foreign policy thinking—from “the Blob,” as Ben Rhodes calls it.

¹ David Samuels, “The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama’s Foreign Policy Guru,” *The New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2016, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html?_r=0.

Attitudes on this question began to shift considerably after the publication of the April 2016 issue of *The Atlantic*, in which journalist Jeffrey Goldberg revealed the disdain that President Obama harbors not just for the foreign policy elite in Washington but also for America's traditional allies in the Middle East and in Europe. Yet the Goldberg article still obscured the vital connection between Obama's Middle East retrenchment, generally speaking, and, in particular, the nuclear negotiations with Iran. Enter *The New York Times Magazine*. Thanks to David Samuel's extremely illuminating profile of Rhodes, that connection is now starting to come clearly into view.

The Keystone in the Arch

From the moment he took office, Obama recognized a fundamental contradiction between his intention to disengage from the Middle East and the traditional American policy of contesting Iran's hegemonic regional ambitions. His ability to pivot from this troubled region, he understood, depended on developing a more cooperative relationship with Iran, a goal that, in turn, hinged on ending the conflict over the nuclear program. In short, the nuclear negotiations were the keystone in the arch of Obama's grand strategy. "It's the center of the arc," as Rhodes himself explained to Samuels. "It's the possibility of improved relations with adversaries. It's nonproliferation. So all these threads that the president's been spinning ... for almost a decade, they kind of all converged around Iran."²

Note the timeline—"for almost a decade." Two years before he became President, Obama was already advocating rapprochement with Iran. Indeed, in a major foreign policy speech in 2006, then-Senator Obama argued that Iran and Syria shared a core interest with the United States in bringing stability to Iraq. "It is simply not productive for us not to engage in discussions with Iran and Syria on an issue of such fundamental importance to all of us," he said.³

From his first days in office, President Obama made no secret of his desire to improve relations with Tehran. However, he did disguise the centrality of Iran to his regional strategy. The idea of pulling America back from the Middle East while simultaneously treating Iran as a legitimate partner in building a regional security architecture was guaranteed to generate opposition from many quarters—from Israel and from the Saudis, to say nothing of the American people and their representatives. If Obama and his inner circle had publicized his true thinking about Iran, the political backlash would have destroyed their project before it ever got started. They'd have gotten "the [expletive] kicked out of them," Leon Panetta told Samuels.⁴

² Ibid.

³ Senator Obama, "A Way Forward in Iraq," Remarks to Chicago Council on Global Affairs, November 20, 2016, available at: http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/govt-and-politics/obama-offers-his-plan-for-the-iraq-war/article_a83b95e9-0f66-516b-808d-63eb7f90d732.html.

⁴ David Samuels, "The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign Policy Guru," *New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2016, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html?_r=0.

To avoid that fate, Obama proceeded surreptitiously. In 2012, he opened secret, bilateral negotiations with the Iranians on the nuclear question in Oman. Simultaneously, he quietly brought his policies in Lebanon, Iraq, and, especially, Syria into alignment with Iranian interests. In November 2013, the administration announced that it had reached an interim agreement on the nuclear question. Shortly thereafter, the existence of the secret Oman channel became known, but few observers understood just how active the Oman channel had been, or what it portended for the future of American foreign policy.

Anatomy of the Deception

Around this same time, Ben Rhodes assembled his war room and echo chamber, the purpose of which was to hide Obama's grand strategy in plain sight. He and his staff accomplished this by churning out false narratives on a daily basis—stories that misled the public in a great variety of ways, of which the following five are but a small sample.

1) Conjuring Moderates. To hear the echo chamber tell it, relations between the United States and Iran began to change in June 2014 when Hassan Rouhani, cast as a moderate, became the president of Iran and began to guide Iran toward reconciliation with the United States and the international community. According to Leon Panetta, however, this story is a fiction. "There was not much question," Panetta told Samuels, "that the Quds Force and the supreme leader ran that country with a strong arm, and there was not much question that this kind of opposing view could somehow gain any traction."⁵

False though it was, the "ascendancy of the moderates" was (and continues to be) a winning theme for the Obama administration, because it fosters a sense of peaceful convergence. It has turned the thaw in US-Iranian relations into a seemingly grand development analogous to dramatic events in the past such as President Nixon's opening to China or the fall of the Berlin Wall. Moreover, by manufacturing the false impression that the Iranian regime is morphing into a kinder, gentler Islamic Republic, the administration has managed to alleviate concerns that the deal it struck with Tehran will completely remove the most meaningful international restrictions on Iran's nuclear program in just ten years' time.

For the administration, the theme has had the added benefit of knocking critics of Obama, and especially Republicans, back on their heels. Moderates in both Washington and Tehran, so the fiction goes, are reaching out to each other to cooperate against the warmongers in their respective countries. In this telling, domestic American critics of Obama's diplomacy become the moral equals and political allies of Revolutionary Guards in Iran, the latter being the fictive hardline rivals of President Rouhani. President Obama himself drew on this imagery in a speech last August. "It's those hardliners chanting 'Death to America' who have been most opposed to the deal," he said. "They're making common

⁵ Ibid.

cause with the Republican caucus.”⁶

2) Falsifying the Chronology. By disingenuously depicting Rouhani as a sailor on the winds of reform, the echo chamber also fostered the impression that the nuclear negotiations were the result of a strategic shift in Tehran rather than in Washington. “[W]ith the election of a new Iranian President earlier this year, an opening for diplomacy emerged,” President Obama commented in November 2013. “Today, that diplomacy opened up a new path toward... a future in which we can verify that Iran’s nuclear program is peaceful and that it cannot build a nuclear weapon.”⁷

We now know that this version of events is highly misleading. Samuels’s interviews with, among others, Jake Sullivan, a principal participant in the Oman negotiations, indicate that the Americans had arrived at the outlines of a deal with the Iranians well before Rouhani even took office.

3) Erasing American Concessions. At every stage of the nuclear negotiations, it was major American concessions that propelled the diplomacy forward. Thanks, in part, to Ben Rhodes and his extensive media network, however, the Obama administration was able to hide this basic fact from the American people. The echo chamber exaggerated the significance of Iranian concessions and overstated the value of the new safeguards and inspections regime that the deal created. When technical experts with stellar, non-partisan reputations, such as the physicist David Albright, made comments suggesting that the administration was overselling the deal, the echo chamber generated a cacophonous din of competing claims.

These techniques proved successful in diverting attention from the full significance of a long string of broken promises—including, for example, the administration’s claims that it would shutter the underground Fordow facility, compel Tehran to come clean on the military dimensions of its nuclear program, and leave in place the sanctions on the Iranian ballistic missiles.

In order to thwart attempts to investigate reports of preemptive American concessions, the echo chamber backed Obama in his own repeated requests for patience. “When it comes to this nuclear deal,” the president said in March 2015, “let’s wait until there’s actually a deal on the table that Iran has agreed to, at which point everybody can

⁶ President Obama, “Remarks by the president on the Iran Nuclear Deal,” Remarks to American University, August 5, 2015, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/08/05/remarks-president-iran-nuclear-deal>.

⁷ President Obama, “Statement By The president On First Step Agreement On Iran’s Nuclear Program,” November 23, 2013, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/11/23/statement-president-first-step-agreement-irans-nuclear-program>.

evaluate it; we don't have to speculate."⁸ Then, as soon as the Iran deal was announced, the echo chamber proclaimed the discussion of past concessions as futile and unnecessary. All that mattered now was the--utterly false--binary choice: accepting the deal, or going to war. "Let's not mince words," Obama said last August. "The choice we face is ultimately between diplomacy and some form of war — maybe not tomorrow, maybe not three months from now, but soon."⁹

4) Hiding the Regional Cost. Perhaps the president's greatest deception was his misrepresentation of the role that the nuclear deal played in his overall diplomacy. He sold the agreement publicly as a narrow arms control agreement, the only goal of which was to sever Iran's "pathways to a nuclear weapon."¹⁰ In actual fact, it was but one piece of a much larger regional vision. In that vision, the United States would recognize the legitimacy not just of Iran's nuclear program but also of its interests in the Arab world. Primary among these interests, of course, was the position of Iran in Syria, where it was backing the government of Bashar al-Assad against the rebels.

The need here was to convince Tehran of the sincerity of the administration's intentions. Especially relevant in this context are the views of Ambassador Fred Hof, the Director of The Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council. Hof, who was the Obama administration's point man on Syria from 2009 to 2012, now believes that the president, in order to entice Tehran to finalize the nuclear deal, has in fact recognized Syria as an Iranian sphere of influence. "To complicate the ability of Iran's man in Syria [that is, Assad] to commit war crimes and crimes against humanity would have placed at risk nuclear negotiations aimed ultimately at dissolving American relationships of trust and confidence with key regional powers," Hof writes. "Yes, the Blob—the foreign policy establishment—would have had a problem with this. Hence an information operation headed by Rhodes aimed at avoiding head-on debates with the Blob or, for that matter, the representatives of the American people in Congress."¹¹

An analysis that is clear as day to Hof, one of the country's top Syria experts, however, is absent from the echo chamber, which works assiduously to obscure the connection between the Iranian nuclear deal and the unimpeded rise of the Iranian-Russian alliance.

⁸ President Obama, "Remarks by the president Before Meeting with Secretary of Defense Carter," March 3, 2015, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/03/remarks-president-meeting-secretary-defense-carter>.

⁹ President Obama, "Remarks by the president on the Iran Nuclear Deal," Remarks to American University, August 5, 2015, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/08/05/remarks-president-iran-nuclear-deal>.

¹⁰ The White House, "Implementation Day Fact Sheet," available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/foreign-policy/iran-deal>.

¹¹ Ibid.

Is the tide finally shifting? Perhaps. Fred Hof is no longer alone among former Obama officials in drawing a connection between Obama's Syria policy and his courtship of Iran. Leon Panetta is another. "I think the whole legacy that he was working on was, 'I'm the guy who's going to bring these wars to an end, and the last goddamn thing I need is to start another war,'" Panetta explained to David Samuels. "If you ratchet up sanctions [on the Iranians], it could cause a war. If you start opposing their interest in Syria, well, that could start a war, too."¹² Unfortunately, the hour is very late, and the damage done, both on the nuclear front and on the front of Iran's regional ambitions, is very great.

5) Blaming Allies. "Our biggest problem was our allies," Vice President Joe Biden told students at Harvard's Kennedy School in October 2014.¹³ Speaking about Syria, Biden blamed America's Sunni allies—Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar—for building up the Islamic State in order to weaken Assad. Curiously absent from Biden's treatment of the Syria problem was a serious analysis of the role that Iran and Russia had played in fueling the murder machine of the Syrian dictator, Bashar al-Assad. This was no idiosyncratic lapse: Biden's statements were part of a disciplined White House messaging strategy.

Disciplined, and again also deceptive. As Obama sees it, America's regional allies are problematic not because they actually support ISIS but because they insist that the United States should lead a regional coalition dedicated to contesting the hegemonic aspiration of Iran and its allies. This understanding of the proper American role directly contradicts the president's desire to disengage from the Middle East while bringing Iran and Russia into the regional security architecture. Preferring not to describe his true vision for the region, the president, it seems, has tasked Rhodes to carry out a whisper campaign against the allies, blaming them, not Iran, for the rise of sectarianism in the Middle East.

But Rhodes has directed his most venomous whisper campaign of all at Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who fully shares with America's Sunni allies a desire to see the United States work to push back against Iran. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that a few weeks after Biden trash-talked America's Sunni allies, a senior Obama administration official described Netanyahu as "a chickenshit."¹⁴ At the same time, a second official bragged about the success of the United States in shielding the Islamic Republic from an attack by Israel.

¹² David Samuels, "The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign Policy Guru," *New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2016, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html?_r=0.

¹³ Vice President Biden, "Remarks to Harvard University's Institute of Politics," October 2, 2014, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcKVctg5dxM>.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Crisis in U.S.-Israel Relations is Officially Here," *The Atlantic*, October 28, 2014, available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/the-crisis-in-us-israel-relations-is-officially-here/382031/>.

“[U]ltimately [Netanyahu] couldn’t bring himself to pull the trigger. It was a combination of our pressure and his own unwillingness to do anything dramatic. Now it’s too late.”¹⁵

Relations between Obama and Netanyahu are notoriously bad, but the administration’s use of the echo chamber to demonize the Israeli prime minister is not really personal; it’s business. Netanyahu’s unusual popularity with the American electorate has forced the White House to impugn his credibility. The preferred mode of attack, however, is asymmetric—to focus as little as possible on the differences between the two men on Iran and to stress, instead, their disagreements over Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy. Rhodes and his echo chamber spin a tale casting Netanyahu as the villain of the Middle East peace process, an arch nationalist with unseemly ties to the right wing of the Republican Party who refuses to make the necessary compromises to bring about an historic reconciliation with the Palestinians.

Ironically, by leveling charges of chauvinism against the leadership of Israel and the Gulf Arab States simultaneously, Obama has helped to push them together. Relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel are, for example, better than ever before. Although some might say the president deserves credit for this dramatic improvement in Israeli-Arab relations, it is highly unlikely that he sees things that way, or will ever claim it.

Restoring Checks and Balances

The White House campaign in favor of the Iran deal, then, has been deceptive from the start. But does it rise to the level of a scandal, one that requires significant and sustained action by Congress? Before answering that question, a few observations are in order.

First, it is important to remember that we are not talking about a rogue operation. Ben Rhodes was not acting on his personal initiative; he was, clearly, carrying out the will of the president. So if any one individual is to be held responsible, it should be President Obama himself.

Second, there can be no doubt that messaging the public on foreign policy is a legitimate, indeed a vital, presidential function. And let’s not be naïve: such messaging will always involve a significant degree of art. If we hold the president to the same standard of truth telling that we apply to friends and family in daily discourse, we are setting ourselves up for perpetual disappointment.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, the White House messaging on Iran crosses the line between artful expression and full-blown deception. From the very beginning, circumventing Congress was a necessary element of Obama’s Iran plan. In January 2014, one of Rhodes’s meetings with progressive activists to convene a political campaign to sell the Iran deal leaked to the public. “This is healthcare for

¹⁵ Ibid.

us,” Rhodes said in a surreptitious recording of the meeting. “We’re already kind of thinking through, how do we structure a deal so we don’t necessarily require legislative action right away? And,” Rhodes continued, “there are ways to do that.”¹⁶

As a result of this deception, even people who served at the highest levels of the Obama administration have begun to express doubts about the president’s true intentions. When, for example, Samuels asked Panetta if he still believed that Obama had meant it when he said he would take whatever steps were necessary to stop Iran from attaining a nuclear weapon, Panetta responded, “Probably not.”

Just as we have not fully understood what Obama was thinking, so we have also failed to understand the nature of the deal that he struck with the Iranians. The rhetoric out of Tehran and the actions of Secretary of State John Kerry now seem to suggest the existence of secret side deals about which we have heard nothing. Why is it, for example, that Secretary Kerry traveled to London last week to convince our allies to invest in Iran? No such obligation exists in the text of the JCPOA, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (which itself is a purposefully opaque document). And why do Iran’s leaders claim that the JCPOA promised them greater economic gains than they have thus far received? Who is telling the truth—the Iranians or the Obama administration?

Given the organized obfuscation and the resulting lack of clarity, I believe that it behooves Congress to reopen an investigation into the many questions raised by the David Samuels article and other reports.

In addition, it also behooves Congress to clip the wings of the National Security Council. Rhodes’s war room is not an isolated problem: it is symptomatic of an NSC that, according to all three of Obama’s former secretaries of defense, has grown imperial in both size and ethos. In order to protect our system of checks and balances, Congress must take action to school the White House in a healthy respect for republican values.

With this idea in mind, some voices are calling for legislation that would subject the NSC to Congressional oversight. Personally, I do not favor this solution. As the head of a co-equal branch of government, the president has the right to organize his staff however he sees fit. Moreover, he deserves the frankest advice available, something his advisors will not provide if they are forced to serve two masters.

Therefore, the most elegant solution, it seems to me, is simply to cut the size of the NSC by limiting its budget and by putting tight restrictions on the number of detailees that it can borrow from other Departments and agencies. This idea is already making its way through the House and Senate Armed Services Committees. The more voices that support this effort, the better.

¹⁶ Matthew Continetti, “The Coming Détente with Iran,” *The Washington Free Beacon*, October 31, 2014, available at: <http://freebeacon.com/columns/the-coming-detente-with-iran/>.

Thank you again for inviting me to testify. We all recognize that the challenges we face are complex, and that reasonable people can draw radically different conclusions from the same facts. However, it now seems more than obvious that, in this particular case, we still do not have all the facts we need in order even to have an honest disagreement. Vital American interests are at stake. I'm grateful to this Committee for delving deeply into the challenges we face and the alternative policies from which we must choose.