

Fallon Gong

The relentless campaign to bring down a realist

By Philip Giraldi

“IF, IN THE DYING LIGHT of the Bush administration, we go to war with Iran, it’ll all come down to one man,” the April issue of *Esquire* argued. “He is the rarest of creatures in the Bush universe: the good cop on Iran, and a man of strategic brilliance.” The profile went on to describe him as “methodical as President Bush is mercurial” and as “brazenly challenging his commander in chief.”

Meet Admiral William Fallon, head of United States Central Command.

Make that former head. Within days of the article’s publication, the media was buzzing over the supposed breach between the Bush administration and its top commander in the Middle East. The Pentagon and White House declined comment, but the *Washington Post* reported “administration insiders said the article was being discussed.” For his part, Fallon disavowed the piece. Five days later, he was finished.

His letter of resignation regretted the “simple perception that there is” a difference of opinion, conceding that reports of disagreement had become a “distraction.” Seeking to close the chapter quickly, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates asserted, “I don’t think that there really were differences at all.”

Perhaps there were, perhaps there weren’t. Fallon’s public statements don’t suggest that he was single-handedly staving off war with Iran, as *Esquire*’s profile implied. Indeed, the most controversial portions were the author’s characterizations rather than the admiral’s own words. But Fallon did show realist tendencies, and advocates

of the president’s agenda couldn’t risk a voice for national-interest-based foreign policy in a prominent position. Neither could administration hawks afford for career military officers to be uninhibited about offering frank advice.

The infamous profile sealed his fate, but the campaign against Fallon began much earlier. The American Enterprise Institute’s Tom Donnelly said, “You heard negative things about him almost from the moment he was named, and the chorus has been almost unrelieved.” Other neocons, realizing that the clock is running out on the Bush administration’s ability to strike Iran, took up the refrain.

Because Fallon saw his Central Command’s role as managing a series of interrelated crises running from Lebanon in the west to Pakistan in the east, one of his first moves at CENTCOM was to drop the expression “the long war” in official correspondence. The change reflected his belief that all wars should be finite, with obtainable objectives. For neocons, the “long war” is shorthand for the existential conflict against Islamic radicalism, but Fallon did not see the world that way. Thus they labeled him a diplomat rather than a warrior, claiming that he preferred negotiation to using the threat of force, particularly when dealing with Iran. Fallon’s physical presence in the Middle East—not at CENTCOM headquarters in Tampa, Florida—meeting with local heads of state and military and naval counterparts was viewed suspiciously, as an indication that he preferred talking to fighting.

Critics further charged Fallon with undercutting our efforts in Iraq by disagreeing with Gen. David Petraeus on the efficacy of the surge. The *Wall Street Journal Online* railed that he had “made more than enough dissenting statements about Iraq, Iran and other things to warrant his dismissal” but went on to admit that Fallon was only one of many miscreants at the Pentagon. Gates, Joint Chiefs Chairman Mike Mullen, and Army Chief of Staff George Casey all reportedly favor a rapid drawdown of troop levels in Iraq. Fallon was by no means the lone dissenter.

But the neocon media rushed to characterize him as mutinous. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the administration saw Fallon’s comments as a “form of insubordination ... publicly trying to undermine Mr. Bush and limit the President’s hand on a key administration priority.” Michael Ledeen described Fallon as “an object of scorn and sometimes contempt by a significant number of his immediate subordinates,” condemning him for seeking a “personal legacy rather than national victory.” Michael Barone wrote that Fallon had worked to “openly undercut the commander in chief,” was “transfixed with cooperating with China,” and believed that “pressuring Israel ... was the way to solve every problem in the Middle East.” Frank Gaffney described his “toxic leadership,” his being “utterly unserious about the Iranian threat,” and his having engaged in “serial acts of insubordination and sabotage...” He added that Fallon foolishly believes that engagement with Iran is the

best way to stop the flow of munitions into Iraq—something high among the recommendations of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group.

The *Washington Times*, in a story headlined “Warriors welcome Fallon’s resignation,” reported that Fallon had failed to protect U.S. troops in Iraq by holding Iran and Syria “accountable,” citing his “lack of reason when it came to Iran’s influence in the region.” In the same pages, Oliver North charged Fallon with insubordination for “publicly disputing administration policy toward an avowed adversary.”

Not to be outdone, *The Weekly Standard’s* Mackubin Thomas Owens condemned Fallon for taking “it on himself to develop and disseminate policy independently of the president,” thereby working to “undercut the cornerstone of the Bush Administration’s Iran policy.”

The *Washington Post* piled on, accusing Fallon of “stating publicly during his travels in the region that there would be no U.S. attack.” The *Post* recommended that a new CENTCOM commander “should be prepared to take military action against Iran and should avoid ostentatious posturing to the contrary.”

Max Boot, who has been sounding the alarm on Fallon for the past year, provided valedictory comments, noting that the CENTCOM commander had “irresponsibly taken the option of force off the table,” which had emboldened “the mullahs to continue developing nuclear weapons and supporting terrorist groups that are killing American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

The problem is that nearly all these assertions are untrue. Evidence for Fallon’s alleged unwillingness to engage Iran militarily consists of comments made in just three interviews and in the profile that he called “poison pen stuff.” And everything Fallon actually said tracked closely with what Gates, Mullen, Condoleezza Rice, and even the

White House were saying. He saw his job in the Middle East as working with allies to build a practical coalition against Iranian ambitions. No American ally in the region—except for Israel—wants a war against Iran. All prefer a negotiated process for resolving differences. It was Fallon’s job to reduce the fear-mongering and bring diverse allies together to shape a co-ordinated answer to the Iranian threat.

In his first interview as CENTCOM chief, with al-Jazeera in September 2007, Fallon was asked if a war was coming. He responded, “I certainly hope not. It is my belief that today there is far too much talk of war. ... This constant drumbeat of conflict is one that strikes me as not helpful ... the vast majority of people want stability, security. ... They really want to live in peace with their neighbors...”

On Nov. 12, 2007, Fallon told the *Financial Times* that a pre-emptive strike against Iran was “not in the offing,” adding, “another war ... is just not where we want to go. Getting Iranian behavior to change ... is the real objective. Attacking them as a means to get to that spot strikes me as not being the first choice...” The interviewer noted that Fallon “did not rule out the possibility of a strike at some point.”

One week later, Fallon told the *Egyptian Gazette*, “We are trying to find ways to work with other countries to get the Iranians to change their behavior.” He added that reports that a U.S. attack was imminent were “not very accurate” and described his objective as encouraging an “atmosphere that will lead to a solution without military force.” He also warned Iran not to “make a mistake and feel that we are afraid of them or not willing to stand up for things that we should do in this region.”

There have been other allegations about Fallon, namely that he told retired DIA Middle Eastern specialist Col. Pat Lang that a war against Iran would “not

happen on my watch.” Rumors circulated that he might resign if given orders to attack Tehran. But Fallon has insisted that he told Lang that war “wasn’t the first course of action” and never confirmed that he considered resignation before the *Esquire* dust-up.

If Fallon’s intention was to avoid war on his watch, he has been successful. But he has paid a high price. While his public sentiments were temperate, the paranoia of administration hawks was so great that this voice of reason could not be permitted to remain. Sources speculate that his departure was hastened at the vice president’s behest, to remove an impediment to Cheney’s efforts to begin assembling an anti-Iran coalition on his recent trip to the Middle East.

The silver lining is that Fallon’s resignation frees him to speak openly about Washington’s Middle East policy. Two previous heads of CENTCOM, Gen. John Abizaid and Maj. Gen. Anthony Zinni, oppose any bombing campaign directed against Iran, fearing what Arnaud de Borchgrave described as “bloody asymmetric retaliation against U.S. interests throughout the Middle East—and beyond.” Both have suggested that the U.S. might have to live with a nuclear-armed Iran.

In its coverage of the Fallon resignation, even the *New York Times* conceded that “a large number of senior military leaders share Admiral Fallon’s broad assessment that a war with Iran would bring unexpected and, perhaps unmanageable, risks elsewhere in the Muslim world and around the globe.”

Among top brass who know the Middle East, William Fallon’s views seem like common sense. That’s why he had to go. ■

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The Audacity of Pope

Will the Pontiff's call for peace faze the warmongers?

By Freddy Gray

ON TUESDAY, April 15, a plane carrying Pope Benedict XVI will land at Andrews Air Force Base. Inside the aircraft, the pontiff, a quiet—some say shy—old man, will brace himself for perhaps the busiest and most important few days of his life.

It is obviously significant, at least symbolically, when the world's foremost religious leader makes a pilgrimage to the most powerful nation on the planet. For this pope, however, at this juncture of history, the trip could be especially momentous. Americans, their economy seemingly collapsing and their military hopelessly entangled in two unending and staggeringly expensive wars, might be particularly receptive to the philosophical insights of an outsider. At any rate, his arrival will offer a brief distraction from the endless media coverage of the presidential elections. For the Vatican, on the other hand, Pope Benedict's East Coast tour provides a unique opportunity for the Catholic Church to preach to the world.

April 16 will be Benedict's 81st birthday. That morning he will visit the White House—only the second time in history a pope has been to the presidential residence. In the afternoon, he will meet his 350 American bishops at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Over the next four days, Benedict XVI will, among other scheduled appointments, preside over two Masses before huge congregations at stadiums in Washington and New York, tour the John Paul II Cultural Center, speak to 20,000 youths at a seminary, address the

United Nations, mark the third anniversary of his election, and pay his respects at Ground Zero. No rest for the holy.

Such a full itinerary gives the pope many chances to make bold and challenging statements about the U.S. and its relationship with the rest of world. What then will Benedict say to America? It is well known, of course, that he has been a fierce and consistent opponent of the Iraq War from its beginning. Will he launch a broadside against the Bush administration's foreign policy? Catholic pundits think it unlikely, especially during a presidential election campaign. "I doubt he'll make many specific policy references, nor will he comment on the U.S. election," says Edward Pentin, Rome correspondent for the *National Catholic Register*. Certainly, Pope Benedict would not want to be seen as endorsing a particular candidate. Despite longstanding complaints about Catholicism muddling the roles of church and state, the Holy See does try—many would say unsuccessfully—to render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's. Benedict XVI, however, is not one to cease from mental fight for the sake of political etiquette. In September 2006, he enraged many Muslims—to the glee of cheerleaders for the "clash of civilizations" everywhere—by quoting a 14th-century Byzantine emperor as saying that Islam was a violent and inhuman religion. He later apologized, though not for the speech itself, only for causing offense.

Many antiwar Catholics will be hoping that Benedict uses his visit to America to attack the other side of the

perceived civilizational conflict. They want him, for instance, to remonstrate against mass consumerism, rampant free enterprise, and the neoconservative agenda for global democratic revolution.

They may not be disappointed. "From my conversations here with people," says Pentin, who has good contacts inside the Vatican, "it looks as though the pope is to focus on globalization and social issues." Benedict's speeches and homilies in Washington and New York are likely to reflect the themes of his forthcoming social encyclical, which is expected to be published on May 1. The document may touch on subjects that make many conservatives blush. It has long been rumored that the text will contain a landmark statement about global warming. Obviously references to the environment would be about man's role as steward of creation, rather than man's duty to worship trees. Still, this is hardly what one would have expected three years ago from the world's best-known traditionalist Catholic.

In a similar context, Benedict XVI will probably also discuss his Church's commitment to "social justice"—a term so successfully hijacked by the Catholic Left that it now seems synonymous with socialism. This argument will extend to the Vatican's opposition to aggressive global capitalism, rootless individualism, and corporate avarice. These are Western vices, and ones that afflict America as much as they do Europe.

It takes only a short intellectual hop and a skip to understand how Benedict's