



Dick Cheney Was For the Iran Deal Before He Was Against It

The former veep's bloviating at the American Enterprise Institute today was hypocritical baloney.

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Like a Ghost of September 11th's Future, former Vice President Richard Cheney returned to the American Enterprise Institute on Tuesday to once again warn against what he sees as the bleak consequences of our post-neoconservative moment. Almost exactly one year ago, he was in the same place, **bemoaning** that the United States “must deal with threats before they become grave dangers and dangers before they become catastrophes,” while eliding his own role in fomenting many of the threats to which he referred. This year, he was back to expand on one of those catastrophes, at least from his perspective: the consequences of the Iran nuclear agreement. Cheney’s opposition to the agreement will be remembered as one of his least consequential foreign policy mistakes — if it is remembered at all. Washington has a short memory, and perhaps that’s what’s most striking about Cheney’s stance on the Iran deal: the clear record that demonstrates that he likely would have supported the deal had it been negotiated a decade ago, and that he would have opposed critics’ tactics to scuttle the agreement on principle, had it been reached by his own administration. Even in Washington, hypocrisy is rarely so blatant as it has been in Cheney’s effort to put himself on the wrong side of the Iran nuclear agreement.

First, there are Cheney’s objections to the negotiations that led to the agreement. In his speech today, he rewrote the history of the Bush administration’s outreach to Iran. In 2006, then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice **said** the United States was “making every effort to achieve a successful diplomatic outcome” to bring the international community together to negotiate a deal to ensure Iran did not build a nuclear weapon. But in recent weeks, Cheney has tried to distance himself from these facts, passing his administration’s diplomatic overtures off on European nations that he says were reacting to the Bush administration’s hawkish posturing on Iran. “It actually was with our European friends, primarily. They were eager to pursue some kind of discussions,” he told the *Weekly Standard* last week, even while admitting he conveniently

didn't remember the particulars. "I'd have to go back and check the record for specific details," he said. Let's make it easy: Secretary Rice's [statement](#) and the international [proposed framework](#) are online.

Today, Cheney also tried to disown an innovation of that diplomatic outreach, the premise that Iran could be allowed to maintain a nuclear-enrichment capacity in exchange for demonstrated compliance with an agreement that ensured its program remained peaceful. The Obama administration, he said in his American Enterprise Institute speech, "agreed to drop the long-standing demand of the international community that Iran halt uranium enrichment." He called for an agreement under which "Iran must halt its enrichment and processing activities," which he claimed is banned anyway by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. "Under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty signed by some ... 190 nations — including Iran, countries with peaceful nuclear programs do not have a right to enrich," Cheney said. Not only is this [false](#), it wasn't even the *starting point* for the Bush administration's proposed talks in 2006. As Carol Giacomo [noted recently](#) in the *New York Times*, "the 2006 proposal did not demand that Iran dismantle its enrichment and reprocessing activities," and "administration officials acknowledged that the package of incentives on offer could, at some point, allow Iran to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes." For Cheney to claim the Bush administration supported an end to all Iranian nuclear enrichment in perpetuity is a bald-faced lie.

Cheney's dishonesty extends beyond his revisionist history of the Bush administration — it also is evident in his proposed measures to undermine the nuclear agreement. In his speech, Cheney complained about the lifting of sanctions under the terms of the agreement, noting that Iran could "walk away from the agreement completely if any attempt is made to sanction them anew," and last week he [wrote](#) in the *Wall Street Journal* that Congress should "reimpose the sanctions that brought Iran to the table in the first place." Cheney now joins [AIPAC](#), [Sen. Chuck Schumer](#) (D-N.Y.), and the Foundation for Defense of Democracy's [Mark Dubowitz](#) in suggesting the United States use unilateral sanctions against foreign companies to strong-arm negotiating partners back into an international sanctions regime and renewed negotiations. With whip lists now suggesting that President Obama has the votes to sustain a veto, the battle to preserve the nuclear deal is already shifting — as [opponents prepare](#) new legislation to obviate the sanctions relief on which Iran's cooperation is predicated in the agreement.

Cheney is an odd bedfellow for advocates of new and tougher U.S. sanctions: He's on record explaining exactly and at length why he thinks those sanctions are a terrible idea. He made this extremely clear when, in 1998, he gave a [speech](#) at the Cato Institute on what he called his "favorite hobbyhorse, the question of unilateral economic sanctions," which he noted "almost never work."

"I think in most cases they [sanctions] are appropriate only where we can think in terms of multilateral sanctions, when there is something of an international consensus willing to follow U.S. leadership," he said then. Just a month before Cheney's speech, President Bill Clinton waived U.S. sanctions that would have penalized European companies for doing business with Iran after several countries threatened to file a complaint with the World Trade Organization for extraterritorially enforcing sanctions. "The nation that's isolated in terms of our sanctions policy in that part of the globe is not Iran. It is the United States," Cheney then said. "And the fact that

we have tried to pressure governments in the region to adopt a sanctions policy that they clearly are not interested in pursuing has raised doubts in the minds of many of our friends about the overall wisdom and judgment of U.S. policy in the area.”

Cheney’s about-face on unilateral sanctions is yet another convenient lapse in memory and professed principles. But it is exactly what we should expect from a man who — 12 years later, after all the original rationales of WMDs, al Qaeda, and democratization have collapsed — still **believes** he “was right about Iraq” while somehow **forgetting** the acceleration of Iran’s nuclear development while he was in office.

In his speech today, Cheney dismissed Obama’s recent **comments** that rejecting the deal risks war with Iran as a “false choice,” and then, moments later, told his audience that the United States must threaten Iran with war to reach its objectives. “Iran will not be convinced to abandon its program peacefully unless it knows it will face military action if it refuses to do so,” he said. “That’s how a self-respecting power with everything in the balance asserts its vital interest.” Perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised he’s prepared to bully the international community again and risk another war in the Middle East, even if he has to rewrite history to explain it.

Thankfully, America’s allies have seen this before and know better. They watched as Cheney and his neoconservative ideology were discredited in Iraq, and today they overwhelmingly support the Iran nuclear agreement. If only the same could be said for the new generation of conservatives, who have been keen to adopt the policy prescriptions of Cheney and his ilk — Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) was sitting in the front row at Cheney’s speech.* They should listen to their own advice: “In the real world, the world outside of Washington, when you fail at one job, you don’t get promoted to another one,” Wisconsin governor and Republican presidential hopeful Scott Walker **said** in his foreign policy address at the Citadel in August. “You get fired.” But here in Washington, Cheney gets invited back each year to AEI, a safety net for his failed and dishonest ideas, to peddle the same fantasies to his successors. It’s past time we all stopped listening.