



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on February 8, 2011

Palins Neocon Path

When John McCain announced his choice of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate on August 29, 2008, the only foreign policy experience or expertise the Republican vice presidential candidate could point to was her 20 months as Governor of the only state between Canada and Russia.

But the former Governor and potential 2012 presidential candidate has come a long way in the little more than two years since the enormously successful “hockey mom” speech she delivered at the Republican National Convention. In an op-ed piece in *USA Today* last December 21, Palin sounded like an old foreign policy hand from inside the Washington beltway.



In the article, headlined “Time to Get Tough With Iran,” the leader of the “Mama Grizzlies” warned of the potential danger to Israel, America, and other nations if the Iranian government should develop a nuclear bomb. Existing sanctions are not severe enough, she insisted, since they are not, in her words, capable of “crippling” Iran economically:

Much more can be done, such as banning insurance for shipments to Iran, banning all military sales to Iran, ending all trade credits, banning all financial dealings with Iranian banks, limiting Iran’s access to international capital markets and banking services, closing air space and waters to Iran’s national air and shipping lines, and, especially, ending Iran’s ability to import refined petroleum. These would be truly “crippling” sanctions. They would work if implemented.

But just how are these crippling measures, particularly the closing of air space and waters to Iran’s commerce, to be implemented? With an air and naval blockade? Palin didn’t say. But shutting off Iran’s access to refined petroleum would be ruinous to its economy, and interfering with its shipping lanes would rightly be considered an act of war. And while Palin insists U.S. policy should support “the brave people of Iran” who have openly opposed the dictatorship there, she somehow overlooks the fact that it is the people, not the government, of Iran that would suffer most from the crippling of that nation’s economy. When children, the sick, and the elderly die because they are unable to obtain the food and medicine they need, the blame will fall on the U.S. sanctions, not the government in Tehran.

At a time when the United States is still engaged in two Middle East wars and our military is stretched to the breaking point, why is Palin urging policies that would put us on a path to war with a nation larger and more formidable than either Iraq or Afghanistan? How would that be prudent when the commander of our forces in Afghanistan, General David Petraeus, has predicted that a military strike against Iran would likely generate nationalist support for the very regime we would like to topple? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that from the beginning of her meteoric rise to national stardom, Sarah Palin has been a project of the neoconservative movement in Washington that continues to promote what George W. Bush described as a “global democratic revolution.” Or as his father put it on



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the run-up to the first Gulf War 20 years ago, it is a quest for a “new world order.”

Summoning Sarah

McCain’s choice of Palin has often been described as an 11th-hour gamble, putting the youthful Governor with limited political experience on the ticket in the hope of attracting young and, especially, female voters. And by all accounts, the Alaska Governor was summoned to McCain’s Arizona home for “vetting” only two days before the nominees stood together on a stage in Dayton, Ohio, where McCain publicly anointed his running mate. But more than a year earlier, Palin came to the attention of some prominent Washington journalists who would play a significant role in promoting her as McCain’s bridge to the party’s conservative base, which has always regarded him as suspect.

In June 2007, when the former Mayor of Wasilla had been Governor for barely six months, a cruise ship chartered by the neoconservative *Weekly Standard* pulled into Juneau on an Alaskan cruise, the kind of ocean-going trip the publication sponsors for well-heeled readers who like to vacation with some of the big names of political journalism. As Jane Mayer reported in the October 2008 issue of *New Yorker* magazine, Governor Palin hosted a lunch for a group that included three of the magazine’s heavy hitters: William Kristol, the editor and, at the time, an op-ed columnist for the *New York Times*; Fred Barnes, executive editor and a talk-show host on the Fox News channel; and Michael Gerson, a former speech writer for George W. Bush and a *Washington Times* columnist. Before the day was over the Governor led the group on a “flight-seeing trip,” with Palin and her staff leasing two helicopters at a cost to the state of \$4,000. (“The pundits paid for their own aircraft,” Mayer reported.)

By the time they left, the journalists were convinced they had seen a star in the making. And it wasn’t just the congenial Governor and former beauty queen’s good looks and personal charm. She had, after all, taken on some of the powerful interests in her state and had defeated the incumbent Governor of her own party, Frank Murkowski, in a primary in 2006. She went on to win the general election, becoming the state’s youngest (at 42) and first female Governor. At the time the *Weekly Standard* crew arrived, her approval rating was around 80 percent, giving credence to a column Kristol wrote on his return to Washington about “America’s most popular governor.”

Kristol continued to write and talk about Palin in his magazine and newspaper columns and in his frequent appearances on Fox News. By the summer of 2008, Kristol was promoting Palin for Vice President so incessantly that *Fox News Sunday* host Chris Wallace finally said, “Can we get off Sarah Palin, please?” It’s worth noting, however, that when Kristol wasn’t pushing Palin, he was boosting Senator Joe Lieberman for “veep.” Lieberman, the Democrat-turned-independent from Connecticut, was widely rumored to be McCain’s first choice. But the Connecticut Senator is solidly liberal on all but his hawkish military stance, and the choice would have likely inspired a backlash by conservatives.

As luck would have it, 2007 was a good year for Alaskan cruises and a good year for Sarah Palin. In August, a cruise sponsored by *National Review* pulled into Juneau, and Palin wound up hosting the likes of editor Rich Lowry, former federal judge and Reagan Supreme Court nominee Robert Bork, and John Bolton, former Ambassador to the United Nations. Dick Morris, the former Clinton political advisor who had since migrated over to the Republican side, was also part of the entourage. Morris advised Palin to maintain her image as an outsider — her “outsider cred” — to be successful in politics. Once McCain announced his V.P. choice, Morris was quick to follow up with an admiring column on the Governor in the *Washington Post*, claiming: “I will always remember taking her aside and telling her that she might one day be tapped to be Vice President, given her record and the shortage of female political talent in the Republican Party.” Kristol, meanwhile, hailed the pick as “one of the few transformational choices



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in modern political history.”

But it was not entirely clear at that point just what or who was being transformed and for what purpose. Tim Shipman, in the British newspaper *The Telegraph*, quoted an official with the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute, who said of the Alaska Governor: “She’s bright and she’s a blank page. She’s going places and it’s worth going there with her.” Pat Buchanan, a prominent foe of the neoconservative movement, said she “has become, overnight, the most priceless political asset the movement has. Look for the neocons to move with all deliberate speed to take her into their camp by pressing upon her advisers and staff, and steering her into the AEI-*Weekly Standard*-War Party orbit.”

A few short days after her selection, Palin, accompanied by Lieberman, met with the board of directors of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and assured them of her “heartfelt support for Israel,” a campaign official told NBC News. The AIPAC officials were “pleased that Gov. Palin expressed her deep, personal and lifelong commitment to the safety and security of Israel,” said spokesman Josh Block. Indeed, Palin’s fervor for defending Israel likely stems from an evangelical Christian belief in the preservation of Israel as a biblical imperative. But it also meshes well with the pro-internationalist policy of neoconservative Republicans, who frequently cite the defense of Israel in their rationale for our frequent and extended military interventions in the Middle East. Palin kept a small Israeli flag on display in the Governor’s office in Juneau and appeared at last year’s Tea Party convention wearing a pin that depicted U.S. and Israeli flags side by side. Concerning the potential threat to Israel from a nuclear-armed Iran, Palin wrote in her *USA Today* article:

Some have said the Israelis should undertake military action on their own if they are convinced the Iranian program is approaching the point of no return. But Iran’s nuclear weapons program is not just Israel’s problem; it is the world’s problem. I agree with the former British prime minister Tony Blair, who said recently that the West must be willing to use force “if necessary” if that is the only alternative.

Way of the Warrior

The McCain campaign put Palin under the foreign policy tutelage of Randy Scheunemann and his colleague Stephen Biegun. A McCain advisor and longtime Washington lobbyist, political consultant, and early advocate of war with Iraq, Scheunemann was a consultant to Senate Republican Leader Trent Lott in 1998 and helped draft the Iraqi Liberation Act that made “regime change” in Baghdad official U.S. policy. He was also a key backer of Ahmad Chalabi, the Iraqi exile who supplied the Central Intelligence Agency with false information about Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction. With the approval of the Bush administration, Scheunemann, in late 2002, founded the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq, an advocacy group to whip up pro-war sentiment throughout the country. And as a principal of Orion Strategies, he numbered among his clients the former Soviet Republic of Georgia. As a paid representative of the Georgian government, Scheunemann was lobbying for the inclusion of Georgia in the rapidly expanding NATO alliance, a move vehemently opposed by Russia.

When fighting broke out between Russia and Georgia in the summer of 2008, candidate McCain quickly presumed to speak for all Americans when he said in a phone call to Georgia President Mikheil Saakashvili, “Today we are all Georgians.” Palin, in her first televised interview after accepting the vice presidential nomination, likewise voiced her support for bringing both Georgia and Ukraine into NATO.

“And under the NATO treaty, wouldn’t we then have to go to war if Russia went into Georgia?” asked Charles Gibson of ABC News.



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“Perhaps so,” Palin replied “I mean that is the agreement when you are a NATO ally, is if another country is attacked, you’re going to be expected to be called upon and help.”

Thus did Palin, the political “outsider” and “common sense conservative,” get quickly on board with the foreign policy establishment of both parties, which already had American soldiers conducting military exercises in Russia’s front yard and had given the formerly defensive NATO alliance a global mission that promises to keep the United States and our allies perpetually at war. Since we are already committed to the defense of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Albania, adding Georgia and Ukraine might seem a natural progression. And with NATO engaged in both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, it now appears the entire world is the stage for military intervention by the United States and its allies.

A visit to the United Nations soon followed, where Palin was expected to learn about foreign policy and make some important connections. She met with Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai, and more importantly, she received, as *Newsday* put it, “her first foreign policy tutorial from Henry Kissinger.” Her 90-minute session with the powerful National Security Advisor and Secretary of State in the Nixon administration was “an excellent meeting,” Biegun told the press, covering a wide range of national security issues, but focused mainly on “Russia, Iran and China.”

Scheunemann remains one of the top policy advisors in the Sarah PAC network, along with Kim Daniels, another survivor of the McCain campaign. Others include Pam Pryor, a former senior advisor to the Republican National Committee, and Robert Barnett, a Washington lawyer who negotiated Palin’s book contract. But the “dean” of the group is Fred Malek, an old Nixon hand who was deputy director of the CREEP (Committee to Reelect the President) campaign of 1972. For the nation’s most celebrated “outsider,” Palin appears well connected to the GOP’s Washington establishment.

Outsider, Maverick, or What?

On the campaign trail, in her (thus far) two books and op-ed pieces, Palin stresses her “outsider” image and her passion for “common sense conservative solutions.” In the keynote address at the first Tea Party national convention in Nashville a year ago, she lamented all the borrowing our government is doing to cover a \$3.8 trillion budget and how that has made us increasingly beholden to other nations. Common-sense Americans, by contrast, know how to live within our means. “We tighten our belts,” she said. “We cut back on our budgets.... It’s what Todd [her husband] and I do when we have to make payroll [or] buy new equipment for our commercial fishing business.”

That common-sense conservatism, with all its belt-tightening imperatives, can vanish rather suddenly, however, when Palin gets on the subject of education, as she did during her vice presidential debate with then-Senator Joe Biden.

“I say, too, with education, America needs to be putting a lot more focus on that and our schools have got to be really ramped up in terms of the funding that they are deserving. Teachers needed to be paid more.... We need flexibility in No Child Left Behind. We need to put more of an emphasis on the profession of teaching.... I’m very, very concerned about where we’re going with education and we have got to ramp it up and put more attention in that arena.”

Since annual appropriations for the U.S. Department of Education were “ramped up” from \$35.7 billion in 2001 to \$137.6 billion in 2009, one might wonder how much “ramping” Palin had in mind. Or how much responsibility she would cede to the federal government over school funding, teachers’ pay, and education standards. Conservatives used to believe that those are local and state issues over which the



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Constitution assigns no role to the federal government.

And while Palin has during the past couple of years been describing Obama's cap-and-trade program as ruinous for the American economy, she supported cap and trade as McCain's running mate. Asked by debate moderator Gwen Ifill if she supported "capping carbon emissions," Palin replied emphatically, "I do. I do."

Perhaps the Palin of 2008 was simply backing the position of the top of the ticket, though she was willing to express her differences with McCain on his opposition to drilling for oil in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. But there was obviously no difference or dissent on the ticket concerning the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Palin fairly gushed over those noble undertakings. In the vice presidential debate, she brought up, only to dismiss, the killing of civilians by our bombing raids in Afghanistan. "That's not what we're doing," she insisted. "We're fighting terrorists, and we're securing democracy, and we're building schools for children there so that there is opportunity in that country, also."

It's possible, of course, to be doing all those things and killing the innocent as well. Every war has its "collateral damage," but the question in Afghanistan is whether we have continued our military presence there beyond its original purpose — the routing of al-Qaeda forces in that country. Building schools, securing democracy, and creating an opportunity society is no more fitting a role for the U.S. military today than it was when Lyndon Johnson spoke of a Great Society on the Mekong Delta in the 1960s.

For all her pronouncements against big government and her praise for the virtues of belt-tightening, it's clear Palin will not be the champion of any serious cutting of the Pentagon's \$700 billion budget. In a speech at a "Freedom Fest" gathering in Norfolk, Virginia, last June, Palin took aim at cost-cutting measures being considered by Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

"Secretary Gates recently spoke about the future of the U.S. Navy. He said we have to 'ask whether the nation can really afford a Navy that relies on \$3 to \$6 billion destroyers, \$7 billion submarines, and \$11 billion carriers.' He went on to ask, 'Do we really need ... more strike groups for another 30 years when no other country has more than one?'" Palin said. "Well, my answer is pretty simple: Yes, we can and, yes, we do, because we must."

Though military spending by the United States is nearly equal to that of all the other countries of the world combined, Palin insists we must spend more. While a consensus is growing in Washington that even military spending must be cut to reduce trillion-dollar-a-year deficits, Palin would put \$7 billion submarines and \$11 billion aircraft carriers off limits to budget cutters.

America, said John Quincy Adams, "goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own." The price of enforcing a global *Pax Americana* is high, in dollars as well as lives. Sarah Palin has become the leader of what she calls "Mamma Grizzlies," women in the political arena who will fight fiercely in defense of home and family. But perhaps the metaphor is misplaced. The Mamma Grizzly fights to defend her own. The hawk flies abroad in search of prey.

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