He was a scourge for twenty years and now no one seriously named chair at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Academic career

Ledeen holds a Ph.D. in History and Philosophy from the University of Wisconsin-Madison where he studied under the Jewish German-born historian George Mosse. His doctoral dissertation eventually became Universal Fascism: The Theory and Practice of the Fascist International, 1928–1936, first published in 1972. The book was the first work to explore Italian leader Benito Mussolini’s efforts to create a Fascist international in the late 1920s and early 1930s. After leaving the University of Wisconsin-Madison Ledeen taught at Washington University in St. Louis but left after being denied tenure. Some faculty indicated that questions about the “quality of his scholarship” and about whether or not Ledeen had “used the work of somebody else without proper credit” were issues, although some also noted that “the ‘quasi-irregularity’ at issue didn’t warrant the negative vote on tenure.”[1]

Ledeen subsequently moved to Rome, where he was hired as the Rome correspondent for The New Republic and was named a visiting professor at the University of Rome. In Rome, Ledeen worked with Italian historian Rienzo De Felice, who greatly influenced Ledeen, drawing a distinction between “fascist regime” and “fascist movement.” Ledeen’s political views developed to stress the “urgency of combating centralized state power and the centrality of human freedom.”[2] Ledeen continued his studies in Italian fascism with a study of the takeover of Fiume by Italian Nationalist forces under Gabriele d’Annunzio, who Ledeen argued was the prototype for Mussolini.

In 1985, in the period leading up to the US presidential election, Ledeen, along with Arnaud de Borchgrave, wrote a series of articles published in The New Republic[3] and elsewhere about Jimmy Carter’s brother, Billy Carter’s contacts with the Muammar al-Gaddafi regime in Libya. Ledeen testified before a Senate subcommittee that he believed that Billy Carter had met with and been paid off by Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

Ledeen has been a long time and active supporter of political dissidents, particularly Iranians, and co-founded The Coalition for Democracy in Iran.

Work in Italy

Ledeen worked for the Italian military intelligence agency SISMI in 1980 providing “risk assessment”[4] and consulting on extradition matters between Italy and the US.[5] It was during his time in Italy that Ledeen came out in his belief in the “Bulgarian connection” conspiracy theory concerning Grey Wolves member Mehmet Ali Agca’s 1981 attempt to assassinate Pope John Paul II. The theory has since been attacked by various authors and journalists, including Washington Post reporter Michael Dobbs, who initially believed the story as well. The theory was adopted in 2005 by the Italian Mitrokhin Commission. According to Craig Unger, “With Ronald Reagan newly installed in the White House, the so-called Bulgarian Connection made perfect Cold War propaganda. Michael Ledeen was one of its most vocal proponents, promoting it on TV and in newspapers all over the world.”[6]

Work in the United States

In the early 1980s, Ledeen appeared before the newly established Senate Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism, alongside former CIA director William Colby, author Claire Sterling and former Newsweek editor Arnaud de Borchgrave. Both Ledeen and de Borchgrave worked for the Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University at the time.[7] All four testified that they believed the Soviet Union had provided for material support, training and inspiration for various terrorist groupings.[8]

Ledeen was involved in the Iran-Contra affair as a consultant of National Security Advisor Robert C. McFarlane. Ledeen vouched for Iranian intermediary Manucher Ghorbaniar. In addition, he met with Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, officials of the Israel Foreign Ministry and the Central Intelligence Agency to arrange meetings with high-ranking Iranian officials, whereby U.S supported Iranians would be given weapons by Israel, and would proceed to negotiate with Hizbollah for the release of hostages in Lebanon.[9] Ledeen’s own version of the events is published in his book, Perils of Statecraft.[10]

Yellowcake forgery allegations

Main article: Niger uranium forgeries


“The first meeting occurred in Rome in December, 2001. It included Franklin, Rhode, and another American, the neoconservative writer and operative Michael Ledeen, who organized the meeting. (According to UPI, Ledeen was then working for Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith as a consultant.) Also in attendance was Ghorbaniar and a number of other Iranians.”

Colleagues Andrew McCarthy and Mark R. Levin have defended Ledeen, writing[12]

Up until now, the fiction recklessly spewed by disgruntled intelligence-community retirees and their media enablers—some of whom have conceded that the claim is based on zero evidence—has been that Michael had something to do with the forged Italian documents that, according to the Left’s narrative, were the basis for President Bush’s “lie” in the 2003 State of the Union Address that Saddam Hussein had obtained yellowcake uranium (for nuclear-weapons construction) in Africa.

Iraq War advocacy

Regarding the “pre-emptive” invasion of Iraq, in 2002 Ledeen criticized the views of former National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, writing:[13]

He fears that if we attack Iraq “I think we could have an explosion in the Middle East. It could turn the whole region into a cauldron and destroy the War on Terror.”

One can only hope that we turn the region into a cauldron, and faster, please. If ever there were a region that richly deserved being cauldronized, it is the Middle East today. If we wage the war effectively, we will bring down the terror regimes in Iraq, Iran, and Syria, and either bring down the Saudi monarchy or force it to abandon its global assembly line to indoctrinate young terrorists.

That’s our mission in the war against terror.

Ledeen specifically called for the deposition of Saddam Hussein’s regime by force in 2002:

So it’s good news when Scowcroft comes out against the desperately needed and long overdue war against Saddam Hussein and the rest of the terror masters.[14]

and:

Question #2: Okay, well if we are all so certain about the dire need to invade Iraq, then when do we do so?

Ledeen: Yesterday[15]

Ledeen’s statements prior to the start of the Iraq war such as “desperately needed and long overdue war against Saddam Hussein” and “dire need to invade Iraq” caused Glenn Greenwald to label his later statement that he “opposed the military invasion of Iraq before it took place” to be an “outright lie.”[16] However, Ledeen maintains these statements are consistent since: “I advocated—as I still do—support for political revolution in Iran as the logical and necessary first step in the war against the terror masters.”[17]

Views on Iran

Although Ledeen was in favor of invading Iraq, he also believes that Iran should have been the first priority in the war on terror.[18] The New York Times describes Ledeen’s views as “everything traces back to Tehran”[19] Ledeen’s phrase, “faster, please!” has become a signature meme in Ledeen’s writings (it is currently the title of his blog on the pajamas media website) and is often referenced by neoconservative writers advocating a more forceful and broader “war on terror.” In 1979, Ledeen was one of the first Western writers to argue that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was a “clerical fascist,” and that while it was
legitimate to criticize the Shah's regime, if Khomeini seized power in Iran the Iranian people would suffer an even greater loss of freedom and women would be deprived of political and social rights. He presently believes that "No one in the West has yet supported Iranian democratic organizations and that "aggressive support for those Iranians who wish to be free" would most likely work in ending the clerical government." [17]

According to Justin Raimondo, Ledeen "holds up Bill Clinton and Madeleine Albright as patsies for Khomeini—who supposedly believed that the Ayatollah overthrew Shah Reza Pahlavi because the Iranian government was 'excessively repressive and intolerant.' While it would not do to come right out and deny the savagery of the Shah's legendary SAVAK secret police, Ledeen informs us, under the monarch's beneficent rule, 'Iran had become too modern, too tolerant—especially of women and of other religious faiths—and too self-indulgent. The shah had Westernized Iran'—except, perhaps, in his prisons, where the ancient methods of torture were routinely employed on dissidents of all sorts."[18]

Ledeen is currently against both an invasion of Iran or air-strikes within the country[19][20] He has argued that the latter may even become more likely if negotiations with the Iranian government fail, but it would only be the "least bad option of many options and it would lead to many negative unforeseen consequences."[21] The New York Times has called Ledeen's skepticism towards military action against Iran surprising given his opposition to the regime.[18] In October 2007, Ledeen argued that:

"Those who believe that I am part of some "hawkish gang" just haven't noticed that I am opposed to invading or bombing the nuclear facilities. My fear is that, by failing to promote a non-violent democratization of Iran, we make large-scale violence much more likely."

"In any event, time will tell, and I share the fear of most commentators [sc] that we will indeed arrive at a horrible choice between Iran with the bomb, or bomb Iran, as Sankozy and Kouchner have put it. And if that happens, it will demonstrate a terrible failure on the part of the West, including the United States, to create a serious Iran policy to these many years."[17]

Controversial theories

Ledeen also believed that Iran is the main backer of terrorism in Iraq and even supported the al-Qa'ida network formerly led by al-Zarqawi despite its declaration of jihad against Shi'ite Muslims.[22] He claimed that German and Italian court documents showed Zarqawi created a European terrorist network while based in Tehran.[23]

Ledeen was a board member of the "Coalition for Democracy in Iran" (CDI), founded by Morris Amitay, a former Executive Director of American Israel Public Affairs Committee (APAC). Ledeen also had been part of the U.S. Committee for a Free Lebanon. According to the Washington Post quoted by Asia Times, he was the only full-time international affairs analyst regularly consulted by Karl Rove, George W. Bush's closest advisors.[24]

Following the February 2003 speech by French Minister for Foreign Affairs Dominique de Villepin at the United Nations General Assembly against the intervention in Iraq, Ledeen outlined, in a column entitled "A Theory," a possibility that France and Germany, both NATO allies of the United States, "struck a deal with Saddam's Iraq and with radical Arabs" to use "extremism and terrorism as the weapon of choice" to weaken the United States. He stated, "It sounds fanciful, to be sure," but that, "if this is correct, we will have to pursue the war against terror far beyond the boundaries of the Middle East, into the heart of Western Europe. And there, as in the Middle East, our greatest weapons are political: the demonstrated desire for freedom of the peoples of the countries that oppose us."[25] See also: Eurabia

Jonathan Goldberg, Ledeen's colleague at National Review, coined the term "Ledeen Doctrine" in a 2002 column. This tongue-in-cheek "doctr" is usually summarized as "Every ten years or so, the United States needs to pick up some small crappy little country and throw it against the wall, just to show the world we mean business," which Goldberg remembered Ledeen saying in an early 1990s speech.[25]

Ledeen has also advocated that U.S. leaders take a stronger rhetorical stance in wars on Islamic regimes and militant groups. For instance he has recommended in public talks that U.S. leaders question or challenge defeated Islamic military forces. He has won one American Contract Bridge League national-level tournament, the 2009 Senior Swiss Teams, on a team-of-four with Karen Allson, Lea Dupont and Benito Garozzo.[26] He has also partnered Jimmy Cayne, who was the oldest CEO on Wall Street when he oversaw the collapse of Bear Stearns in 2007 and 2008. Consulted by a New York Times journalist early in the episode, Ledeen suggested that his book on the leadership lessons of Machiavelli had influenced Cayne, and observed that "Jimmy saw himself in Machiavelli ... you have to get rid of failure and you have to punish lack of virtue ruthlessly and all the time."[27]

Personal life

Ledeen was born in Los Angeles, California. He is married to his second wife, Barbara. His first wife was Jenny Ledeen of St. Louis, Mo. Ledeen has three children: Simone, Gabriel, and Daniel. Simone has worked both in Iraq and Afghanistan for the Department of Defense; Gabriel is currently a Lieutenant in the United States Marines Corp serving his second tour in Iraq; Daniel too is currently a Lieutenant in the USMC.[25]

Ledeen is an accomplished contract bridge player. He has won one American Contract Bridge Leaguational-level tournament, the 2009 Senior Swiss Teams, on a team-of-four with Karen Allson, Lea Dupont and Benito Garozzo.[26] He has also partnered Jimmy Cayne, who was the oldest CEO on Wall Street when he oversaw the collapse of Bear Stearns in 2007 and 2008. Consulted by a New York Times journalist early in the episode, Ledeen suggested that his book on the leadership lessons of Machiavelli had influenced Cayne, and observed that "Jimmy saw himself in Machiavelli ... you have to get rid of failure and you have to punish lack of virtue ruthlessly and all the time."[27]

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