

The Iran Crisis #18: Ray McGovern on Araghchi in Russia, U.S. & Israeli naval piracy, and more

Transcript of the conversation Helena Cobban had with Ray McGovern on 5/1/2026. The video is [here](#). The audio is on [Apple Podcasts](#) and [Spotify](#).

[Helena Cobban]

Hi, everybody. I'm Helena Cobban. I'm the president of Just World Educational and I'm delighted that this is... the 18th episode in our Iran crisis project.

Today is May 1st. So happy May 1st to everybody who's out there and to our guest today who is Ray McGovern. Welcome, Ray.

[Ray McGovern]

Thank you, Helena.

[Helena Cobban]

So Ray McGovern, in case you don't know, was one of the founders of the organization called Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, which is a thing. And also, he had a long career in the Central Intelligence Agency, during which in the early 80s, he was the actual person who presented the president's daily brief to the presidents of that era, which was mainly Reagan, I think. So we've got a lot to talk about.

Ray, you did appear earlier in this series, actually on February 26. I don't want to bring this up. But your prediction then was that, well, you said it would be crazy for any American president to attack Iran.

And here we are, God.

[Ray McGovern]

Well, you know, my reasoning was too logical. In other words, I said they could close the Strait of Hormuz. They could do XYZ and no sane person would do that.

Well, applying logic and sanity to our president is not a good idea these days. He's so mercurial and so unpredictable that I've given up on analyzing the White House. I still try to do the Kremlin.

[Helena Cobban]

So we'll come to the Kremlin later, which as people will remember, was visited a couple of days ago by Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi. But I want to focus first of all on the situation here in Washington.

You are not in Washington. You're in, I think, North Carolina, but you keep a close eye on what's been happening here. And so I want to look at two aspects of this. One is, nine weeks after our previous conversation, what do you think about the possibility of the U.S.-Israeli side breaking this ceasefire, which they have already done by imposing the blockade, but undertaking some kind of large-scale offensive action in the coming days? So that would be a reprise of the kind of situation we were in nine weeks ago.

[Ray McGovern]

Yeah, which they have already done in Lebanon also, I would emphasize. And I want to make the point that it's almost deserving of the adjective altruistic, what the Iranians are doing. Now, [if] I was one of the Iranian leaders, and I thought I could get a deal with Donald Trump, and I wanted Lebanon included, and he said, no, I think maybe I'll take the deal.

So what's my conclusion? These guys are serious.

[In the U.S.] They are monarchies. They don't give a rat's patootie about what happens to the people in occupied Lebanon or in Gaza, for God's sake. But the Iranians, they do. And so they said, no, this is also a requirement.

In other words, in brief, the arc of resistance, or the axis, if you will, of resistance is a real thing. These people care about each other. They're not even Arabs, but they are Muslims.

And so this, I think, is an indicator of not only how Iran is very confident, but that it means what it says when it's going to support whatever people are resisting occupation, which is totally legal, including armed resistance. And it's not going to stop doing that no matter what. And I think right now, it has the capability of withstanding the worst that the US and Israel has to throw at it.

[Helena Cobban]

Okay, you think that they are capable of withstanding? I agree. I mean, I've looked at various aspects of their defensive capability.

And you and I both know that when President Trump crowed about we've obliterated the Iranian military, we've obliterated the Iranian Navy and all of that, that he really doesn't have a clue what he's talking about.

But here we are more than 60 days into this current conflict, and the Authorization for the Use of Military Force should be kicking in at the congressional level. So how do you assess the mood in Congress right now? I mean, I think there is a lot more resistance, political resistance, to US-Israeli diktats in the US Congress now than there was even a year ago.

[Ray McGovern]

Yes, Helena, I would agree. It's gone from about 5% to 20%. I hate to be cynical about it.

It's us that has to make this happen. Okay. Congressmen are bought and sold.

You know, the 60-day limit by legislation, I mean, I had some hope for that. And then I realized, legislation is legislation. They're not going to say boo about that.

They'll say, oh, you can have another 30 days or oh, no, no, blah, blah, blah. So, you know, I think it's a fool's errand to depend on congressmen, unless you and I put the kind of pressure on our congresspeople. And it is possible, because they are turning, because 60% of the American people have an unfavorable opinion of Israel right now, according to recent polls, Pew polls. Now, Netanyahu, not so bad. Only 59% of American people have an unfavorable. So, this is a sea change.

How long will it take Congress to catch up with that? Well, let's look toward November, if the current administration doesn't fool around or prevent the November elections.

[Helena Cobban]

Well, there are possibilities. I mean, we've seen already they're attacking the Voting Rights Act here in various ways and getting some support from the Supreme Court. Let's hope that the elections go ahead and that they are relatively free and honest.

[Ray McGovern]

You have people like Steve Bannon saying, well, maybe there shouldn't be elections or we'll fix the elections or we have a way to, I mean, Steve Bannon. I mean, Trump listens to him, just like he listens to Jesse Waters, who I happened to see this morning. He's talking to a Navy captain. Oh, yeah, we got to do this.

So, you know, it's complicated. But I think we have an opportunity here to rise up and make sure this doesn't happen. I am deathly afraid that all these big warehouses that are being scooped up by ICE around the country in less populated areas, that you and I, Helena, will end up in one of them before the election.

And I do not say this in jest. These guys are serious. And one indicator in a bizarre kind of negative way, indirect way, is why would the President of the United States, in addition to all the other stuff he's doing, pick a fight with the Pope?

I mean, it doesn't make any sense. 55% of us Catholics, I'm sorry to admit, voted for him last time. So, this gives me to believe that he doesn't care so much about the midterm elections.

And that's odd, unless he has some sort of plan to attenuate what might happen in November. That's just me. But I think that's based on a little bit of evidence right now.

[Helena Cobban]

Oh, that's a scary prospect. So, we did see, obviously, in the past couple of days, these hearings on Capitol Hill, House Armed Services Committee and the Senate Armed Services Committee, where it's my understanding that the legislative branch has the right to demand that members of the executive branch come and be, not grilled, but questioned in a respectful way. And that it's up to the people who come, like the Secretary of Defense, or

indeed the Secretary of War, would come and treat their hosts on Capitol Hill in a respectful way and answer their questions.

But that is not what happened with Pete Hegseth. So, how does that play out? First of all, I hope everybody here saw some of the clips of Hegseth in an extremely rude and belligerent manner, trying to talk over the members of Congress, talk over the senators, and just treat them with contempt.

But how do you think that plays out, Ray?

[Ray McGovern]

Well, Trump has changed the rules. These people are instructed to be rude, to give no quarter, if you will, if that applies to Congress. And it is really quite remarkable, because I've been around a while, I've never seen that kind of contemptuous attitude toward people who are supposed to be overseeing you.

So, how will it play out? Well, as long as the Republicans have the majority, as long as they want to, you know, hang in there and support Trump, or as long as they're not too divided, it's not going to play out. This is, I think it's today that the 60 days are up, or tomorrow.

I mean, we'll have to see how that goes. Will somebody mention it? I mean, it's not, it's conceivable to me that nobody will even mention it, least of all those flacks that pose as journalists in the White House press room.

[Helena Cobban]

Who love to go to the White House correspondence dinner. Which is, I mean, from my perspective, I was a working journalist for several years. And the idea that one would schmooze openly and proudly with the people that one is supposed to be, holding to account is a very weird form of journalism.

It has to do with retaining access to sources so that you get leaked to and being leaked to involves being very frequently lied to. Not my form of journalism at all. Yes, I wonder whether they will talk about the 60-day authorization for the use of military force.

The other key player, of course, would be Chuck Schumer, the Senate minority leader, and Hakeem Jeffries, the leaders of the Democratic Party in the House and the Senate. Are they going to make an issue about this? What do you think?

[Ray McGovern]

Well, he seems to be firmly in control, even though a lot of people don't like him right now.

[Helena Cobban]

Hang on, the he being who?

[Ray McGovern]

Schumer, Chuck Schumer from New York. You know, he actually admitted to being of the same view as that ambassador we have in Israel right now. That, you know, Israel is entitled to the greater Israel and that God promised, promised as a real estate agent that Israel would live in that property.

And we're going to expand. I mean, a little vignette. I was on the West Bank about 10 years ago. We went up to one of these marble, one of these beautiful settlements on the top of a grassy knoll where the sprinklers were going on. Well, down on the bottom, the Palestinians had no running water. Okay.

And a friend of mine says, now, how do you explain that? You know, people down there have, and the rabbi-- from Cleveland, mind you-- head of the settlement says, well, God promised that. And so, somebody said, well, where?

Well, Deuteronomy 15, 4, "You shall have the promised lands." And I knew just one verse from the Old Testament. And I said, why don't you read the whole thing?

What do you mean the whole thing? Read the whole verse. He said, "You shall have this promised land, so that there shall be no poor among you."

I said, oh, so it's sort of like a deal, sort of like a covenant, huh? So, why did you forget that? So, we had to exit the settlement then because we weren't any more.

But that's the way they twist these things. And Schumer is the worst. And I don't know how this power works very well in Congress, but it seems like he's got a whole lot of things for a while.

Nobody is clever enough to challenge him. And I hope I'm wrong on that. I'm a novice when it comes to internal politics.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, well, I want to move to Moscow, which this week welcomed Abbas Araghchi. What's your take on that visit? Because obviously, you were a Russian specialist for most of your career in the Central Intelligence Agency.

So, what can you tell us about Araghchi in Moscow meeting Putin?

[Ray McGovern]

Yeah, well, it's not the first time he met Putin, but it's an extraordinary advantage to speak man to man with the top guy. I would just refer to-- Everything moves so fast! It was just a week ago that Araghchi announced he's going to go to Pakistan, Islamabad.

And so, Trump said, oh, okay, Whitkoff, Jared, get going. And they're going to the plane. And then Araghchi: no, no, we're not going to talk to the Americans.

I'm going to talk to the Pakistanis who are mediating this thing. And then I'm going to go to Oman, talk about the Strait, and then I'm going to go to Moscow. So, if the Americans want to come, fine, but we're not going to talk to them.

That was the background. He did go to Oman. They had to talk about the Strait.

After all, Oman is on the other side of the Strait, right? They have a way of regulating it now. And the next thing you know, Araghchi shows up in Moscow.

He's greeted with open arms, and he meets Putin almost immediately after he arrives. Now, one thing that I do inherit from my decades of Russian analysis is looking at communiqués and seeing what can be gleaned from the language.

Now, I looked at what came out here *[in a Russian read-out of the phone call that Putin had with Pres. trump, shortly after his meeting with Araghchi.]*

Ushakov is Putin's right-hand person on these matters. He has been for 20 years. He was for 10 years ambassador here in the United States, so he knows which end is up.

So, he's giving this report as he always does. This is the Russian, I almost said Soviet, this is the Russian readout, okay? "The talks were conducted in a friendly manner. They were frank and businesslike, and at the end he says they were concluded on a warm note, wishing each other all the best. Okay, that's the good news, because the Russians want to keep these relations open. He flatters Trump, okay?"

...

Yeah. He said, first of all, glad you escaped the bullet, and we're really happy about your wife, Melania, helping to repatriate refugees.

[Helena Cobban]

Sorry, I didn't realize-- This is Ushakov's readout of?

[Ray McGovern]

Of the meeting between, not the meeting, but the call that--

[Helena Cobban]

Oh, okay, because, yeah, because we'd been talking about the Araghchi meeting.

[Ray McGovern]

Yeah, I'm sorry, I jump ahead sometimes, but yeah, so Araghchi arrives, and actually we should go back to that, because who's there? The head of military intelligence for the Russian side, Kostyukov. What's he doing there?

That's a very big signal that, look, if you can help those Iranians send drones into Russia, we can help the, if you can help the Ukrainians send drones into Russia, we can help the

Iranians do whatever they want. Okay, so Kostyukov is there. The talks go really well, and then what you have is Putin calling Trump.

I skipped that step. I'm sorry for that uncertainty. So, then we have the Ushakov readout, and he says these were business-like, friendly, business-like, warm note, wishing both, and he talks about Melania and all this kind of stuff, and then he says, now look, if you resume military action, Putin told Trump, okay, this would inevitably lead to extremely adverse consequences, not only for Iran, but for its neighbors.

Like us, we're neighbors of Iran, remember? Okay, and for the entire international community. Then he says, he stressed, Putin, that a ground operation on Iranian territory would be particularly unacceptable and dangerous.

I went back to the Russian just to find out what those words were. They're the strongest that can be used. Completely unacceptable.

Now, that's a code here that what Putin is saying to Trump, and this is official readout, okay? Look, for God's sake, if you renew your airstrikes, that's going to be a terrible danger, but if you make a ground invasion, that's going to be completely unacceptable. Russia's soft underbelly is Iran, for God's sake.

It's been a danger as the Soviets and the Russians see it forever, so they're not going to let Iran go down, neither are the Chinese, and what he's saying, or what he did say to Trump, that is Putin himself, look, it's completely unacceptable. If you even think of putting ground troops in Iran, and I think not only because of this warning, but also because it would be the most feckless thing you could do, and the US military is against it, that we're not going to have a ground invasion of any size, and I thank God for that.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, I think a ground invasion is just looking at the numbers, unsustainable, they won't be doing it. So, I have two questions about what you just said. One is, I had heard or read reports that Putin was presenting himself as a potential mediator or intermediary to help end the war.

[Ray McGovern]

That's correct.

[Helena Cobban]

I didn't hear that from what you gave me on the readout.

[Ray McGovern]

Yeah, I didn't include that, but here it is. Russia remains firmly committed to facilitating diplomatic contacts aimed at achieving a peaceful resolution, and has put forward several provisions, several proposals to help address differences on the Iranian nuclear program.

Okay, now, it talks about active contacts still going on between the Russians and the Iranians and the Gulf states.

So, nuclear program. Well, the JCPOA, the Iran deal, so to speak, 10 years, 11 years ago, had provision for Russia to take a lot of enriched uranium.

[Helena Cobban]

Which they did, and that happened.

[Ray McGovern]

Yeah. So, this is a natural, if Trump is really worried about nuclear weapons, he has all kinds of ways to get out of this fix that he's put himself in. This is one way, and the Russians are explicitly saying, look, we could facilitate it just like we did last time, okay?

But he's not. You know, the nuclear thing is a red herring. As you know, Helena, since 2007, when the intelligence community rose to the task and said Iran stopped working on a nuclear weapon at the end of 2003, and had not resumed work. I mean, Trump has the option of contending that, oh, look, I made them promise not to develop a nuclear weapon.

Sotto voce, of course, they weren't developing a nuclear weapon anyway, they had enriched uranium. Now, that judgment was repeated every year since 2007. It was a national intelligence estimate, the supreme genre of intelligence.

I chaired a couple of those myself when I was on active duty. And Bush and Cheney intended to attack Iran on their last year in office. And that's clear, because what Bush said in his memoir, we have to read memoirs too, he must have written this himself.

He said, that was an eyestopper. That estimate, I don't agree with it, but it deprived me of the military option for, and this is a quote, how can I authorize a strike on the nuclear facilities of a country that the intelligence community says has no active nuclear weapons program? Wow.

Bummer, huh? So that's what they intended. That's the only time I know of that a national intelligence estimate has played a huge role in preventing a war.

And as you know, just a couple of months ago, Tulsi Gabbard decided not to include that in the most recent thing. So we're in never-never-land.

[Helena Cobban]

So back to the potential for Russian mediation or facilitation or whatever. To my mind, the relationship between Russia and Tel Aviv is also a significant one. And they could, or should be acting to try to rein in some of what Israel is doing in Lebanon and elsewhere in the region, like in Syria, and obviously Gaza.

Do you have any evidence that the Russians have been trying to do this? Because they do have a good relationship with Israel.

[Ray McGovern]

Yeah, that's a long story and it has confused me for a while. What they're doing with the Israelis are all under the table. I'm sure that they're urging them not to continue to do what they're doing in southern Lebanon.

It's for Israel's own good, I'm sure that Putin but he doesn't do that publicly. One has to remember there are a million or two Russians in Israel.

[Helena Cobban]

And serving in the armed forces at all levels.

[Ray McGovern]

Yeah. And the other thing is that Putin wants to keep contacts with both countries so that he's in a position to say to both countries, look, you know, Israel, US, Iran, you know, we can actually, we have the kinds of relationships and the kinds of ties that can help us facilitate this. This is a little bit unusual.

Usually, the Russians don't jump in and say, look, give us a chance, we can do this. But this is *in extremis* right now. The Russians are very worried.

And to use such strong language coming out of the readout, you know, completely or *совсем*, all together, not acceptable. Okay, ground invasion, also unacceptable, renewing the attack. So, I think this is a big deal.

I think Araghchi laid it out to the Russians and say, okay, give us time now, we'll try to work and see if the if the Americans will deal.

Now, there's one fly in the ointment as well. And that is not all Russians trust the US, can you imagine? I mean, Medvedev, the former president, is vitriolic and saying, look, there can't be a deal with the United States. There's no deal at all possible. Yeah, we should keep contacts and on Ukraine, maybe.

But no deal is possible. These guys lie through their teeth. Medvedev, the day after Putin talks with Trump.

So, there is a lot of sentiment in Russia that look, when are you going to wise up? These guys are not serious. They're devious.

They lie. They trick you. They send these real estate agents that you spend five hours with from 11.

What's going on, Vladimir? So, there's that element too. And if I were Russian, I might be asking him the same questions.

[Helena Cobban]

And worth recalling, of course, that Kushner and Witkoff are handling both the Ukraine negotiations with Russia and supposedly any negotiations that there are with Iran.

[Ray McGovern]

I mean, and the Gaza.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah. Yeah. And the Board of Peace. I mean, holy--

[Ray McGovern]

Man, they're versatile guys.

[Helena Cobban]

They must be very smart, don't you think? Because they're capable of doing all these, making all these great diplomatic breakthroughs.

[Ray McGovern]

That's what Medvedev thinks. He's called, well, he's called the Europeans a bunch of idiots. And I'm sure he includes Kushner and Witkoff in that.

[Helena Cobban]

I mean, a lot of people say that Medvedev kind of is an alter ego for Putin, right?

[Ray McGovern]

Yeah, I think it's good cop, bad cop.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, he says what Putin can't or doesn't want to.

[Ray McGovern]

But he also represents the sector in the people in Russia who are really fed up with this very gradualist approach and continuing to host Kushner and Witkoff. If Putin lets these two characters come to Moscow again and listens to them, I think he's been going to be under some duress from these people: My God, when are you going to wise up?

Even the Iranians have wised up. How about you?

[Helena Cobban]

So just before we leave talking about Moscow, you mentioned the possibility, well, their adamant opposition to an American ground invasion of Iran. Tell me about this corridor that Trump seems to have opened through Azerbaijan and Armenia that is just north of the Iranian border. And does it play any role at all in, I mean, I'm assuming it does in providing bases for Americans to do surveillance of Iran at the north, or in potentially cutting off Iran from Russia, which has very like, I mean, there are rail lines and all kinds of communications, which give Iran a lot more strategic depth and resilience than it would have if it were an island like Cuba.

[Ray McGovern]

Well, that's a very good question, Helena. But there's a great big sea, if I remember my geography, the Caspian Sea. So the Russian Navy, you know, is all over.

I mean, the Russians have naval ships in the Caspian Sea. And they also watch that with eagle's eye. This is not new.

It is, of course, intensified, but it's been being prepared for the last two years, the Azerbaijanis and the Armenians and all this kind of stuff. The Russians are acutely aware of that. You know, the irony of all this, and let me just digress for a second, is that it was through Iran that all most of our support for the Soviet fight against Nazis came.

I mean, that was a good Iran. We got a real corridor, these trucks that were made by Studebaker. My God, it was terrific.

700,000 trucks, two and a half [ton trucks], could do anything, go into marshes. So I had personal experience with one of the Soviet generals who all he could say in English was Studebaker. And then he gave me a big Russian bear hug.

So anyhow, it's ironic that here Iran was helped to save the Soviet stymieing of the- Well, actually helped to defeat Nazism. Yeah, right. So, you know, there's hope that the Russians can kind of come back to their senses.

And there are indications, even in this readout, that Putin is adopting a different attitude towards Ukraine. It says here that on Ukraine, the Russians and the Americans feel the same way about Zelensky. My God, that's a change from Biden, isn't it?

So that's another sea change and another area where the Russians are really, really intent on making sure that they keep whatever's left of a decent relationship with Trump, mercurial as he may be.

[Helena Cobban]

Well, so much to think about there regarding the role of Russia. Let's move now to flotillas, because this week we have seen the outright piracy from the Israeli naval forces, seizing control of many of the boats, wrecking some of the boats and kidnapping these wonderful

humanitarians from the Gaza Samud flotilla. So, Ray McGovern, you were on a flotilla to Gaza 15 years ago, was it?

[Ray McGovern]

Let's see. It was 2011. Yeah.

[Helena Cobban]

So you were there, Alice Walker, lots and lots of wonderful people, and you got stopped by the Israelis. And flotillas have continued since then, most intensively since the genocide in Gaza. Obviously, starvation is a big part of the genocide and denial of medical equipment and so forth.

How do you look at the relevance of these flotillas? Have they made a difference?

[Ray McGovern]

I think they make a huge difference, not least to the people in Gaza. People in Gaza expected us way back 15 years ago. It gave them some heart, and of course, they were really disappointed, but I think that they saw some solace in the fact that the Israeli piracy was shown once again to exist.

Now, this time, as of a day ago, they had seized 21 of the 58 boats in this flotilla. And I know what happens, they go to the prison in Ashdod, and it's really awful what they do. And this time they did it right outside of Crete, for God's sake, which is hundreds of miles away from Gaza.

So, they're getting more ferocious rather than less. In our case, as you may recall, the Israelis made it clear, look, Alice Walker, *New York Times* people, I don't care who's on that thing. We had those people.

[Helena Cobban]

You had people from the mainstream media?

[Ray McGovern]

Yeah, we had a *New York Times* person, okay? This was very cleverly set up by people like-- and other people, Jewish people in New York that financed and helped remodel this boat so it was seaworthy and flag it under the US. Anyhow, what happened was the Israelis said, look, Obama, I know that you care about these people.

We don't care about these people. We have no guarantee that we won't shoot up like we did the Mavi Marmara last year, right? And so, Obama-- I got a word from the National Security Council people indirectly that Obama was just as happy to see us come home in coffins and boost his standing with his Israeli supporters.

Now, that was hard to believe, but Craig Murray, my good friend, verified that through his contacts with Clinton's State Department. Anyhow, we were prepared for the worst. We're going to go anyway.

Now, in the event, it was late, early July, we were told, look, you can't go because there's a defect in your air conditioning system. So, our captain and Ann Wright and our leadership had a council of war and says, let's go anyway. Next morning, we're out there.

Oh, wow. We're nine nautical miles out of Piraeus, almost in the Mediterranean Sea. And what happens? Greek Coast Guard comes around very apologetically and says, look, we're sorry about this. We only follow orders.

Our captain prolonged this thing for a whole hour, arguing back and forth, and then they're about to board us. And so, he turned around. Now, what happened? Well, clearly, Obama leaned on the Greeks who desperately needed an IMF loan at that time.

He said, look, for God's sake, don't let that boat get out of Piraeus.

[Helena Cobban]

And presumably the same thing happened this time, because it was also the Greeks that, I mean, it was very close to Greece, and they took most of the people who'd been on the flotilla to Crete, which is part of Greece, part of the EU.

[Ray McGovern]

So, if you're waiting for a US reaction from Trump this time, it'll be the same reaction as Obama. And the reason this is all relevant, of course, it shows what kind of handle Netanyahu, in this case, has on Trump and the rest of the leadership in Washington.

You know, this was the same way with the war on Iraq. It was mostly at Israel's urging that we did that, like more than 50%. Okay. And Scowcroft, who never spoke out of turn, National Security Advisor to first George Bush, and then the next guy.

What he said was this, he was head of the President's Foreign Advisory Board. Okay. And he watched all this stuff.

And when it happened, when the war started, he went to the *Financial Times*. Scowcroft went to the *Financial Times*. He said, look, what happens is this, Ariel Sharon, who was Prime Minister then, has Bush wrapped around his little finger.

He has him, quote, "mesmerized". Well, Scowcroft was relieved of his duties as head of that board, and never darkened the White House steps again. But for a guy like Scowcroft, to be so incensed that who was running this thing, to speak out that way was "inconceivable", if you want to quote the Princess Bride, but he did it.

So, those are just symptoms. I've had lots of examples, personal examples of actually physical examples of the whole that the Israel lobby has on Congress, for example. Can I give you one example?

[Helena Cobban]

Just one example. Yeah.

[Ray McGovern]

Okay. Here I am at a concert by the Arlington Symphony. This is about 20 years ago. Okay. And I see Senator John Warner walking out at intermission out in the patio. I said, oh, Rita, I'm going to go talk to him.

So, I go up to Senator Warner. You remember me, Ray McGovern? I gave you your seat. I gave you a seat at the Bolshoi when we were there in '72 for the SALT accords. Oh, there was you. Oh, wonderful, right?

And grabs me. Well, now, what's on your mind? I said, well, I think Israel's about to attack Iran.

The vice grip. I mean, I had no blood flowing into my arm. He said, what did you say?

I said, I think you should know that there's good evidence that the Israelis are going to attack Iran. And he said, hello, Joe. And he lets go of my arm.

And that was the end of our little conversation. It was a physical manifestation of this guy is a senior senator, head of the armed services committee, for God's sake. When I mentioned Israel, he grabbed my thing in a, what is it, reactive kind of way, not even thinking.

And then as soon as he could, he made believe he knew this next guy. And so, he was away from McGovern. So, I mean, when you have that kind of experience, you say, oh, my God, Joe, what is this all about?

It's the same or even worse under Trump.

[Helena Cobban]

I mean, you also mentioned Obama. And just, I think, yesterday or the day before, he was pressed at an event to answer whether he thought that what the Israelis are doing in Gaza is a genocide. And Obama, in 2026, refused to say that it is a genocide.

[Ray McGovern]

And he's a lawyer, right? He taught constitutional law.

[Helena Cobban]

But yeah, so I think it's probably time to wrap up this. I could go on about piracy for a long time, because obviously, we've seen the US Navy engage in piracy in the Indian Ocean against that unarmed Iranian naval vessel that was there for show. We've seen the US Navy repeatedly engage in piratical and lethal acts in the Caribbean and the Eastern Pacific Ocean.

And, you know, we've seen them seize Iranian oil tankers over near Malaysia. And now we see the Israelis doing this against the flotilla. So I think piracy seems to be the order of the day right now, as it has been since the beginning of Western imperialism.

But, you know, we can go talk about that a bit more. Just before I leave you, Ray, tell me about this book by David Swanson, our mutual friend, because I know he wanted this to get mentioned. The book is about a guy who was a Quaker who became a Marine captain.

That's very weird. How does a Quaker become a Marine captain? But then what happened?

[Ray McGovern]

He became a Marine general, the most highly decorated Marine to Medal of Honor. And then he figured out that war was a racket. Okay.

Now, what David Swanson, who is one of the smartest guys around, has done is looked at what Smedley Butler, general of the Marines, said, not only that war was a racket, but all his other writings. And among them, and I put this in a blurb for David, what he said was Butler owned up to his racketeering abroad, but he also strongly opposed using the military at home. Okay.

For example, Butler denounced using the National Guard to, quote, coordinate striking workers behind barbed wire concentration camps in Georgia and spying on activists. Can you imagine? Okay.

This is in the '30s. Okay. So, those in power today, in my blurb, are tempted to use the Guard, ICE, and other things, spies, perhaps even our regular armed forces, to coordinate those trying to ensure free elections in November.

In other words, it was amazing to me. Here's Smedley Butler in 1935, talking about what the equivalent of ICE, the National Guard, was used to do back there in those days. And here we are today.

That's my primary worry now, that the midterms will not come off in a fair way. They may not come off at all. And I don't put it past the administration to do that.

And talk about piracy? Well, you can piracy an election too, I think.

[Helena Cobban]

Yeah, you can engage in piracy at home and abroad. And that's a really sad place for us to end up.

But thank you so much, Ray McGovern, for having talked to us today.

This is an episode in our continuing series on the Iran crisis, which obviously three days after we launched the series, it became an Iran war. And we obviously want to end that war. And thank you for your many efforts to do so.

If people who are watching this want to see all the records of these 18 conversations, go to our website, www.justworldeducational.org. And you'll find a lot of wonderful things there, including a little button that says donate. And if you donate, then you will help support our work.

Thank you, Ray. And goodbye. Talk to you again soon.

[Ray McGovern]

Most welcome.