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Hersh: Congress Agreed to Bush Request to Fund Major Escalation in Secret Operations Against Iran

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Congressional leaders agreed to a request from President Bush last year to fund a major escalation of covert operations against Iran aimed at destabilizing Iran's leadership, according to a new article by veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh in the New Yorker magazine. The operations were set out in a highly classified Presidential Finding signed by Bush which, by law, must be made known to Democratic and Republican leaders. The plan allowed up to \$400 million in covert spending for activities ranging from supporting dissident groups to spying on Iran's nuclear program. Hersh joins us from Washington DC.

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According to Hersh, US Special Forces have been conducting cross-border operations from southern Iraq since last year. These have included seizing members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and taking them to Iraq for interrogation, and the pursuit of so-called "high-value targets" who may be captured or killed.

While covert operations against Iran are not new, Hersh writes that the scale and the scope of the operations in Iran, which involve the CIA and the Joint Special Operations Command, have now been significantly expanded.

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Seymour Hersh, Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist for the New Yorker.

AMY GOODMAN: We are on the road, Denver, Colorado. We turn now to our first segment. Congressional leaders agreed to a request from President Bush last year to fund a major escalation of covert operations against Iran, aimed at destabilizing Iran's leadership. This according to a new article by veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh in *The New Yorker* magazine. The operations were set out in a highly classified presidential finding signed by Bush, which by law, must be made known to Democratic and Republican House and Senate leaders and ranking members of the intelligence committees. The plan allowed up to \$400 million dollars in covert spending for activities ranging from supporting dissident groups to spying on Iran's nuclear program. According to Hersh, U.S. special forces of been conducting cross-border operations from southern Iraq since last year. These have included seizing members of the Iranian revolutionary guard and taking them to Iraq for interrogation, in the pursuit of so-called "high value targets" who may be captured or killed. All covert operations against Iran are not new; Hersh writes the scale and the scope of the operations in Iran, which involve the C.I.A. and the joint special operations command, have now been significantly expanded. He is a Pulitzer prize-winning journalist. He joins me now on the telephone from Washington, D.C. Welcome to Democracy Now!

SEYMOUR HERSH: And a very good early morning to you.

AMY GOODMAN: Start off by talking about how you learned this information.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well, that stops me for a second, Amy. Here's the problem with that question: this is all very classified. Let's just say that in general, there are a lot of people who are very loyal to the U.S.—military people, people in special operations, people elsewhere in the Congress obviously, people in the Executive—who are increasingly being made anxious,—and I think "frightened" is a fairly good word, too—about what this President and the Vice President may do in Iran. And so it was from that quarter I was able to learn that... the problem with the finding, and the problem with the whole story, the complication is that, almost the last people, it seems to me, that know exactly what our special forces are doing—particularly the joint special operations command, which is a very elite unit, whose mission essentially is, this is a separate unit of the special operations command called JSOC... Their unit to go find and kill and capture, if possible, high-value targets anywhere in the world. The whole world is a free fire zone for them. When they get into a place like Iran, where they are, the Congress isn't told. So Congress did approve—and the words were very careful—"up to"—because the president wanted as much as that; we just don't know how much he's taken at this point... \$400 million dollars for operations. And then they discovered the operations they approved may go way beyond what they think they were approving. So it's sort of like the end of democracy, in a way. We don't know what the government is doing. People inside the government don't know what the government is doing. So it was from this sort of collective angst that people began to talk to me about the operations.

AMY GOODMAN: Can you talk about the Democratic controlled Congress, and what exactly it approved late last year?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Late last year, at the time of the—as many in the audience will remember—at the time of the National Intelligence Estimate was made public in late November or early December. And that was a document that—I do not know why it has been totally devalued by everybody, including by all the candidates. The two Democratic candidates during the primary and McCain kept on talking about Iran as if it was on the edge of being nuclear. What the N.I.E. said—and it was a really carefully done document—was since 2003, the evidence is clear that Iran has not pushed a weapons program. There’s no evidence they are actually seeking weapons, as they have been saying. That’s what the N.I.E. said. At the same time, as we all know this President and the Vice President and the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Adviser and the Secretary of State—they’ve all disavowed it. It’s as if it didn’t exist. At that time, Bush went to Congress with the finding that said “I need this huge chunk of money to continue operations.” He has the right as President to ask that only a few members of Congress – it’s known in the law informally as the Gang of Eight – and that would be the House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi; her counterpart, the leading Republican in the House; the Majority Leader in the Senate, Harry Reid of Nevada and his counterpart; and all the Democratic and Republican chairmans of the House and Senate Intelligence Committee—in the case of the Democrats, it’s Rockefeller in the Senate and Reyes from Texas in the House. Those four Democrats got a chop at this. The finding was given to them, particularly in the intelligence committees; lawyers looked at it—and did nothing. The money was eventually appropriated by both the House and Senate Defense Appropriation Subcommittees, just as a line item. The rest of the Congress knows nothing about these kind of operations. When it gets to highly classified operations, the money is promulgated through a highly classified defense appropriations subcommittee. The rest of the people in the business—on the floor, in various committees—it could be on the other side of the moon as far as they’re concerned. But those eight people, the four Democrats—Reid, Pelosi, Rockefeller and Reyes—did nothing. It’s complicated because I can’t tell you officially, the answer everybody gives is “we can’t talk about this kind of stuff.” It’s amazing, it’s sort of the catch-22. I did learn—

AMY GOODMAN: But again, a key point here is that the N.I.E. of the 16 spy agencies, had come out saying Iran did not have nuclear weapons, they had abandoned the program years ago.

SEYMOUR HERSH: Yes. I wouldn’t say the word “abandoned,” but they said there was no evidence they had done anything since 2003. It might have been “on pause,” whatever you want to say. The N.I.E. was very clear, very devastating for an administration that was trying to rally public support. So what you have is at the same time, within the same few weeks, and of course the White House knew about the N.I.E. since August or probably earlier, that it was going to be hurtful in terms of their campaign against Iran. And so at the same time, these Democrats approved the money, and the best guess I can tell you—what I heard from one, two aides actually, who knew the process—is that the Democratic position was very sort of cynical. Which is that “We’re going to do well next year in the election. We’re gonna certainly increase our plurality in the House and Senate, and we’re probably gonna win the presidency. Let’s not give Bush an issue, right now. Let him have his money so he cannot accuse us”—you

know, the old traditional fear of the Democrats of being soft on national security. I did hear that from a couple of people as the reason. But none of the members can speak about it, because if they do, they are violating the law. And so that's what I meant by catch- 22. For a democracy, is a very strange situation.

AMY GOODMAN: Can you talk about the Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and what he had to say about the situation, about the Bush administration attacking Iran?

SEYMOUR HERSH: The leadership of the caucus, the Democratic Caucus in the Senate, has off-the-record lunches. Not every week, but on Thursdays usually. They're pretty sacrosanct in the sense when you go in they're pretty secure, and in this case, Gates went to one of the lunches. He knew many of the senators for many years, he's been around Washington forever. During the colloquy, [he] said very flatly, that if we bomb Iran, our grandchildren will be fighting jihadists. The senator with whom I talked about this said the other senators are stunned, a million questions about it. He eventually said he was speaking for himself. But you know, Amy, let me say something. I write in the article also that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, [Admiral Mike] Mullen, is known to be pushing back on the idea of bombing, and also that these ten combatant commanders—you know, these are the guys who run the commanders in chief in the Far East, or the CENTCOM [Central Command], or what you will. And members of some of the junior members of the joint chiefs have all signed or gotten together collectively—at least 10 of them—to say “no bombing.” But here's the problem with that kind of thinking: We're ready to go. This has been an issue for this president for three years. As you know, I have been writing in *The New Yorker* constantly about this stuff, and it doesn't go away. After three years, our submarines are there, they have the targets, our cruise missiles, our destroyers are there, the cruise missiles are loaded on them, and all targeted. Our air force and navy—not so much the marine—will have a big role in particular in it. They have their target selection, they've gone through the practice. We have ground troops. One of the problems with hitting Iran is if you hit 'em big, is a lot of their anti-aircraft and anti-missile batteries are dug-in underground so marines and other units have to go in and basically blast them out. So before you bomb Iran, you have to take out their radar and their defensive systems. You can't do it in any other way than a big package, unless you want a lot of your planes shot down. This has been practiced, it's been exercised, they've done it, they're ready to go. I can tell you that no matter what Gates thinks and no matter what Mullen thinks, if the president says “go,” on January the 13th, 2009, a week before the inauguration, they will go. Because that's just the way the system is. He's got the—

AMY GOODMAN: What about Admiral [William] Fallon, who was forced out over this?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Yeah, well that's a complicated story. He was forced out, as everybody knows. Bill Fallon was the commander-in-chief for the central command, which gave him responsibility for Afghanistan and Iraq and presumably the covert war inside Iran. What Fallon did, of course, we know that he was publicly against the bombing of Iran, he just did not think it made sense. What I discovered was that was a factor in getting him in a lot of trouble, particularly with Mr. Cheney. But another major

issue for Fallon in terms of—Cheney, I should say, his attitude toward him is Fallon discovered all of the special operations inside Iraq, he knew about it, and certainly knew about some of the cross-border stuff into Iraq, and about the big stuff going on. There's been a new task force set up in Afghanistan under the Joint Special Operations Command, under the rubric of the \$400 million dollars that we discussed earlier. And he couldn't get into it. He wasn't cleared. He wasn't on what they call a "bigot list." I have actually been told, here's some lieutenant commander telling a four-star admiral, "Sir, I cannot discuss this with you, because you're not cleared." He pushed. He wanted to know. This is what they call an "AO," his area of operation. He wanted to know what the hell was going on in his area of responsibility, and he did not like special forces teams operating—I don't think he was against what they were doing necessarily, but he wanted to know. He wanted the responsibility to know, and that caused him a lot of trouble. What is amazing to me for this story, is Fallon did talk about some of this in an indirect but enough of a way, and one of his former commanders when he was a two-star general—a very bright marine general named Jack Sheehan who last year was asked to be the czar for the war by the White House. If you want guys with integrity running your military, he is one of them. Sheehan talked to me on the record about it, and said Fallon's problem is with a certain group in the White House, and we all know who that is, that's the Vice President's office. I still personally think, and I do not know, because one can't know—and I have some access to the vice president's office, but I do not know what the president thinks. We all hear a lot of stories that he's not, but I still think Cheney is the top dog on a lot of issues in this government.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to turn to Iran's reaction to the threats of a possible attack from Israel. This is what the Iranian foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki had to say at a conference on Sunday in Pakistan.

MOTTAKI: We do not see the Zionist regime in a situation in which they would engage in such adventurism. They know full well what the consequences of such an act would be in the region.

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour Hersh, your response?

SEYMOUR HERSH: Well of course. Look, Israel can't do it, because I just described earlier the kind of anti-missile defense they would run into. This is a country, Iran, that has been spending hundreds of millions if not billions on improving its defenses, at \$140 a barrel. The idea of a sanction regime card hurting them seriously is comical. They're making a lot of money and buying a lot of weapons and have never improved their security to the point where the idea of is your which has submitted aircraft and limited missile, cruise missile capability, it will not be able to do much. I can tell you that inside the White House, Cheney has said more than once that Israel is not gonna go. If Israel wants to go, we will have to go because if they went, we would be blamed anyway. The whole—how much of this is posturing from Israel and how much of this is posturing by us—I don't know. I would love to have at the end of this regime be proven to be dead wrong on all this stuff, that it never was going to happen. But I do think the idea of Israel going is not realistic because they simply do not have the firepower. We're the ones that

can do it. This is the Presidency—you have to listen to what these guys say. They're pretty consistent. If you listen to what they said before the invasion of Iraq, in '03 when many thought it was just crazy, including me, that it would not do it. It has been pretty clear. They could not care less with the N.I.E. said. They believe Iran either has or will have a weapon and will be stabilize Israel, and would use it against Israel, even if it meant suicide, ignoring the fact that Iran has never attacked anyone outside of its borders for 280 years, or something like that as a major power. They have never done an offensive operation, that is just a simple fact. That is just ignored by this White House. They talk about Iran—internally, their position is, we're not leave the Presidency with Iran capable of blowing up the world, and they believe they are capable. They want to stop it. It cannot stop with negotiations, I do not know what they will do. Particularly if Obama is elected. Obama looks like he's gonna win, that a definite increase the chances of the president doing something. If McCain wins, I've been told by people who listen to conversations there, it will be easier for them because they think McCain is on the same wavelength, which he is, on all of these issues, and that McCain could possibly do it in the middle of next year or whenever he chose. But if Obama is the winner, that will put pressure on Bush. Bush says all the time, he just said it a few weeks ago—"I don't care what people think about me. I gonna do the right thing." You know, we have the most radical president we have ever had, leading our country right now, and he is completely uneducable. If that does not scare the hell out of you, it scares the hell out of me, I'll tell ya.

AMY GOODMAN: Finally, Seymour Hersh, what are the groups the U.S. is running right now in Iran, the opposition groups?

SEYMOUR HERSH: You know – the enemy of my enemy is your enemy. Certainly, we have been doing a lot of stuff with the MEK [People's Mujahedin of Iran], the whackos that we have been doing stuff with inside Iran from their little base in Iraq for years, doing cross-border kind of stuff. They are still doing a lot of stuff. They're a pretty corrupt organization. They're banking a lot of money that we're giving them. As you know, Iran is a Shiite-dominated country but you have a number of Sunni groups, who live on the borders with the Sunni Kurds, who do not like the government, many elements of them do not, and they're getting funded. Another group of Shias, who are 50% of the population—there is some dissidence there. So we're dumping a lot of money into various groups. You can always pay them money to kill people. Many of their young people have gone to the same madrassas and the Taliban—in the Taliban. There's a lot of other stuff going on in the name of al Qaeda. Their number of course we probably would not look at it all. We are funding the because they're against the central government. You know what it's like? Someone once said to me if the Iranians are coming in there and looking around for grabs, it is as if the Iranians came to America and wanted to cause trouble. Here's is critical the sons of the revolution in the south and have this flag and it cannot even fly the rebel flag anymore. Wow obviously this would be a great group to go up to and get them to go against the government, not knowing the sons of the revolution are totally loyal to America in every sense. We are flying blind. We do not know who we're giving money to. The idea that Iran is not a tribal country, not an Arab country, it is a Persian country, a country with a solid in terms of its national

identity as France, Germany. The idea you will cause significant trouble internally is a smoke dream. What this White House wants to do with these new operations, yes, continuing the old command collecting intelligence and causing trouble. The real thing I think they want from JSOC, which are the junta killer teams of America, I think Cheney would love to get a scientist, nuclear scientists and bring them back to America and have them publicly testify to the fact that yes, indeed, Iran has 36 bomb factories, just like Vice President Cheney goes to bed with in his dreams. They would like to have that. They would also like to create enough chaos in the country, bombings, sabotage, which is going up since this operation began. There's always the connection but I do not have any empirical evidence for it. In the last four months, the latest incidents in terms of domestic violence, bombings, in attacks have gone up exponentially. We would like to the Iranian central government crackdown but in some vigorous weighed against these groups include a situation where there is sort of open dissidents, open warfare, then perhaps begin come in. The problem America has with the Bush/Cheney administration, is the American public overwhelmingly is not very interested in the bombing of Iran, despite all of the biblical talk.

AMY GOODMAN: Seymour Hersh, we will leave it there. Thank you for being with us. Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh, is a piece years in the *New Yorker* magazine called "Preparing the battlefield: the Bush administration steps up its secret moves against Iran." This is democracy now!, democracynow.org, the war and peace report. I'm Amy Goodman. When we come back, a battle over affirmative action in Colorado. We will have the debate. Stay with us.