

Bringing on 'World War III'

by *Bill Berkowitz*

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich re-inserts himself into the political debate

If you thought that a global conflagration on the order of a world war was more the stuff of Biblical prophecy, science fiction and apocalyptic end-of- times novels, think again.

For years, U.S. neoconservatives have been ratcheting up the rhetoric -- mostly in small gatherings and on partisan Web sites -- claiming that terrorist activities around the world constituted the initial stages of a new world war.

But during the past several weeks, with the Israeli/ Hezbollah conflict in full swing, Newt Gingrich, the former speaker of the House of Representatives, is using any media platform available to him to launch a campaign aimed at convincing the public that the United States is engaged in World War III.

Gingrich made national headlines when he claimed while discussing the situation in the Middle East during an appearance on NBC's "Meet the Press" on July 16 that the United States should be "helping the Lebanese government have the strength to eliminate Hezbollah as a military force."

A day earlier, the Seattle Times reported that during a fundraising trip to the state of Washington, Gingrich used the term World War III, while at the same time mixing in a little partisan politics, acknowledging that he was his concerned about the Republican Party's prospects in the fall elections.

"This is World War III," Gingrich said. "Israel wouldn't leave southern Lebanon as long as there was a single missile there. I would go in and clean them all out and I would announce that any Iranian airplane trying to bring missiles to re-supply them would be shot down. This idea that we have this one-sided war where the other team gets to plan how to kill us and we get to talk, is nuts."

Gingrich also maintained that the use of the term "World War III" could re-energise the base of the Republican Party. He pointed out that public opinion can change "the minute you use the language" of World War III. The message then, he said, is "okay, if we're in the third world war, which side do you think should win?"

Gingrich, a regular Fox News Channel contributor also appeared on the network's "Hannity & Colmes" program, and restated his World War III contention.

In a recent column, the Rev. Jerry Falwell echoed Gingrich's comments: "... I believe we are on the verge of a war without borders, one that could bring bouts of violence and bloodshed into our lives. Remember that Iran's Ahmadinejad has not only threatened to destroy Israel, but has also threatened to nuke the United States."

While Gingrich's media tour definitely thrust him back into the national political spotlight, it may have also given the public a sneak peek into the Republican Party's political/marketing strategy for the November congressional elections: If the war on terrorism doesn't create a fearful enough climate amongst voters, why not ratchet it up by mentioning the specter of a World War III?

Gingrich, who has also been testing the waters for a 2008 run at the presidency, was not the first conservative to use the phrase World War III. Media Matters for America, a Web site devoted to "monitoring, analysing, and correcting conservative misinformation in the U.S. media," recently documented a number of World War III references by a gaggle of cable television's conservative talking heads.

On the July 13 edition of Fox News' The O'Reilly Factor, host Bill O'Reilly said "World War III ... I think we're in it."

On the same day's edition of MSNBC's Tucker, a graphic read: "On the verge of World War III?"

"CNN Headline News host Glenn Beck began his program on July 12 with a discussion with former CIA officer Robert Baer by saying 'We've got World War III to fight,' while also warning of 'the impending apocalypse,'" Media Matters for America noted.

"Beck and Baer had a similar discussion on July 13, in which Beck said: 'I absolutely know that we need to prepare ourselves for World War III. It is here.'"

President Bush mentioned World War III in May, telling CNBC that the action taken by the passengers on the hijacked flight 93 on Sep. 11, 2001 was the "first counter-attack to World War III."

Bush said that he agreed with the description by David Beamer, whose son Todd died in the crash, in an April Wall Street Journal commentary that the act was "our first successful counter-attack in our homeland in this new global war -- World War III."

Hyping World War III isn't new to conservatives. Some have even argued that the real World War III was the Cold War against the Soviet Union, and that now the United States is engaged in World War IV.

The Project for the New American Century (PNAC), a neoconservative think tank that in the late 1990s was advocating regime change in Iraq and has consistently promoted a muscular U.S. foreign policy, was one of the groups that used the term World War III to describe the Cold War.

In April 2003, at a teach-in at the University of California, Los Angeles sponsored by Americans for Victory Over Terrorism, R. James Woolsey, a former CIA director and founding member of PNAC, told the audience that "This fourth world war, I think, will last considerably longer than either World Wars I or II did for us; hopefully not the full four-plus decades of the Cold War."

Woolsey pointed out that the religious rulers of Iran, the "fascists" of Iraq and Syria, and terrorist groups like al Qaeda were the main targets of the new war. But PNAC and Woolsey's labeling of the Cold War as World War III and the current war against terrorism World War IV may have been more a case of premature elocution than a precise reading of the times. That construct "might sell well inside the Beltway, but out in the countryside where the younger generation can't recall the Cold War it doesn't do much," John Stauber, the

founder and executive director of the Center for Media and Democracy and the author of the forthcoming book, "The Best War Ever," told me in an email.

"The Cold War was the best thing that ever happened to American capitalism, and the collapse of the Soviet Union was a disaster for the Eisenhower-named military-industrial complex," Stauber pointed out.

"The strategists among the pro-war right jumped all over 9/11; an endless, secret, war against a foreign enemy bent on terrorism and acquiring weapons of mass destruction is an even better scenario for American militarists than the Cold War."

"Calling it World War III is sound packaging," he said. "You've got to call it something and five years after 9/11 with Osama [bin Laden] still roaming free and Iraq an American quagmire, and the Republican Party in danger of losing control of Congress, this ploy makes marketing sense."

If the Republican Party brain-trust -- read, Karl Rove -- determines that labeling the Democrats "cut and runners," "weak on terrorism," or that they are incapable of understanding the reality of the dangerous world we live in, does not appear to be resonating with voters, the term World War III just might be put in play.

Photo of Mr. Berkowitz courtesy of Earl Richardson

Bringing on 'World War III' by Bill Berkowitz