
Stopping Iran: Why the Case for Military Action Still Stands

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UP UNTIL a fairly short time ago, scarcely anyone dissented from the assessment offered with “high confidence” by the National Intelligence Estimate [NIE] of 2005 that Iran was “determined to develop nuclear weapons.” Correlatively, no one believed the protestations of the mullahs ruling Iran that their nuclear program was designed strictly for peaceful uses.

The reason for this near-universal consensus was that Iran, with its vast reserves of oil and natural gas, had no need for nuclear energy, and that in any case, the very nature of its program contradicted the protestations.

Here is how *Time* magazine put it as early as March 2003—long before, be it noted, the radical Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had replaced the putatively moderate Mohamed Khatami as president:

On a visit last month to Tehran, International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] director Mohamed ElBaradei announced he had discovered that Iran was constructing a facility to enrich uranium—a key component of advanced nuclear weapons—near Natanz. But diplomatic sources tell *Time* the plant is much further along than previously revealed. The sources say work on the plant is “extremely advanced”

and involves “hundreds” of gas centrifuges ready to produce enriched uranium and “the parts for a thousand others ready to be assembled.”

So, too, the Federation of American Scientists about a year later:

It is generally believed that Iran’s efforts are focused on uranium enrichment, though there are some indications of work on a parallel plutonium effort. Iran claims it is trying to establish a complete nuclear-fuel cycle to support a civilian energy program, but this same fuel cycle would be applicable to a nuclear-weapons development program. Iran appears to have spread their nuclear activities around a number of sites to reduce the risk of detection or attack.

And just as everyone agreed with the American intelligence community that Iran was “determined to develop nuclear weapons,” everyone also agreed with President George W. Bush that it must not be permitted to succeed. Here, the reasons were many and various.

To begin with, Iran was (as certified even by the doves of the State Department) the leading sponsor of terrorism in the world, and it was therefore reasonable to fear that it would transfer nuclear technology to terrorists who would be only too happy to use it against us. Moreover, since Iran evidently aspired to become the hegemon of the

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Middle East, its drive for a nuclear capability could result (as, according to the *New York Times*, no fewer than 21 governments in and around the region were warning) in “a grave and destructive nuclear-arms race.” This meant a nightmarish increase in the chances of a nuclear war. An even greater increase in those chances would result from the power that nuclear weapons—and the missiles capable of delivering them, which Iran was also developing and/or buying—would give the mullahs to realize their evil dream of (in the words of Ahmadinejad) “wiping Israel off the map.”

Nor, as almost everyone also agreed, were the dangers of a nuclear Iran confined to the Middle East. Dedicated as the mullahs clearly were to furthering the transformation of Europe into a continent where Muslim law and practice would more and more prevail, they were bound to use nuclear intimidation and blackmail in pursuit of this goal as well. Beyond that, nuclear weapons would even serve the purposes of a far more ambitious aim: the creation of what Ahmadinejad called “a world without America.” Although, to be sure, no one imagined that Iran would acquire the capability to destroy the United States, it was easy to imagine that the United States would be deterred from standing in Iran’s way by the fear of triggering a nuclear war.

Running alongside the near-universal consensus on Iran’s nuclear intentions was a commensurately broad agreement that the regime could be stopped from realizing those intentions by a judicious combination of carrots and sticks. The carrots, offered through diplomacy, consisted of promises that if Iran were (in the words of the Security Council) to “suspend all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, including research and development, to be verified by the IAEA,” it would find itself on the receiving end of many benefits. If, however, Iran remained obdurate in refusing to comply with these demands, sticks would come into play in the form of sanctions.

And indeed, in response to continued Iranian defiance, a round of sanctions was approved by the Security Council in December 2006. When these (watered down to buy the support of the Russians and the Chinese) predictably failed to bite, a tougher round was unanimously authorized three months later, in March 2007. When these in turn failed, the United States, realizing that the Russians and the Chinese would veto stronger medicine, unilaterally imposed a new series of economic sanctions—which fared no better than the multi-lateral measures that had preceded them.

WHAT THEN to do? President Bush kept declaring that Iran must not be permitted to get the bomb, and he kept warning that the “military option”—by which he meant air strikes, not an invasion on the ground—was still on the table as a last resort. On this issue our Western European allies were divided. To the surprise of many who had ceased thinking of France as an ally because of Jacques Chirac’s relentless opposition to the policies of the Bush administration, Nicholas Sarkozy, Chirac’s successor as president, echoed Bush’s warning in equally unequivocal terms. If, Sarkozy announced, the Iranians pressed on with their nuclear program, the world would be left with a choice between “an Iranian bomb and bombing Iran”—and he left no doubt as to where his own choice would fall. On the other hand, Gordon Brown, who had followed Tony Blair as prime minister of the UK, seemed less willing than Sarkozy to contemplate military action against Iran’s nuclear installations, even as a last resort. Like the new chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, Brown remained—or professed to remain—persuaded that more diplomacy and tougher sanctions would eventually work.

This left a great question hanging in the air: when, if ever, would Bush (and/or Sarkozy) conclude that the time had come to resort to the last resort?

Obviously the answer to that question depended on how long it would take for Iran itself to reach the point of no return. According to the NIE of 2005, it was “unlikely . . . that Iran would be able to make a nuclear weapon . . . before early-to-mid next decade”—that is, between 2010 and 2015. If that assessment, offered with “moderate confidence,” was correct, Bush would be off the hook, since he would be out of office for two years at the very least by the time the decision on whether or not to order air strikes would have to be made. That being the case, for the remainder of his term he could continue along the carrot-and-stick path, while striving to ratchet up the pressure on Iran with stronger and stronger measures that he could hope against hope might finally do the trick. If he could get these through the Security Council, so much the better; if not, the United States could try to assemble a coalition outside the UN that would be willing to impose really tough sanctions.

Under these circumstances, there would also be enough time to add another arrow to this nonmilitary quiver: a serious program of covert aid to dissident Iranians who dreamed of overthrowing the mullocracy and replacing it with a democratic

regime. Those who had been urging Bush to launch such a program, and who were confident that it would succeed, pointed to polls showing great dissatisfaction with the mullocracy among the Iranian young, and to the demonstrations against it that kept breaking out all over the country. They also contended that even if a new democratic regime were to be as intent as the old one on developing nuclear weapons, neither it nor they would pose anything like the same kind of threat.

All well and good. The trouble was this: only by relying on the accuracy of the 2005 NIE would Bush be able in all good conscience to pass on to his successor the decision of whether or when to bomb the Iranian nuclear facilities. But that estimate, as he could hardly help knowing from the CIA's not exactly brilliant track record, might easily be too optimistic.

To start with the most spectacular recent instance, the CIA had failed to anticipate 9/11. It then turned out to be wrong in 2002 about Saddam Hussein's possession of weapons of mass destruction, very likely because it was bending over backward to compensate for having been wrong in exactly the opposite direction in 1991, when at the end of the first Gulf war the IAEA discovered that the Iraqi nuclear program was far more advanced than the CIA had estimated. Regarding that by now notorious lapse, Jeffrey T. Richelson, a leading (and devoutly nonpartisan) authority on the American intelligence community, writes in *Spying on the Bomb*:

The extent that the United States and its allies underestimated and misunderstood the Iraqi program [before 1991] constituted a "colossal international intelligence failure," according to one Israeli expert. [IAEA's chief weapons inspector] Hans Blix acknowledged "that there was suspicion certainly," but "to see the enormity of it is a shock."

And these were only the most recent cases. Gabriel Schoenfeld, a close student of the intelligence community, offers a partial list of earlier mistakes and failures:

The CIA was established in 1947 in large measure to avoid another surprise attack like the one the U.S. had suffered on December 7, 1941 at Pearl Harbor. But only three years after its founding, the fledgling agency missed the outbreak of the Korean war. It then failed to understand that the Chinese would come to the aid of the North Koreans if American forces crossed the Yalu river. It missed the outbreak of

the Suez war in 1956. In September 1962, the CIA issued an NIE which stated that the "Soviets would not introduce offensive missiles in Cuba"; in short order, the USSR did precisely that. In 1968 it failed to foresee the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. . . . It did not inform Jimmy Carter that the Soviet Union would invade Afghanistan in 1979.

Richelson adds a few more examples of hotly debated issues during the cold war that were wrongly resolved, including "the existence of a missile gap, the capabilities of the Soviet SS-9 intercontinental ballistic missile, [and] Soviet compliance with the test-ban and antiballistic missile treaties." This is not to mention perhaps the most notorious case of all: the fiasco, known as the Bay of Pigs, produced by the CIA's wildly misplaced confidence that an invasion of Cuba by the army of exiles it had assembled and trained would set off a popular uprising against the Castro regime.

On Bush's part, then, deep skepticism was warranted concerning the CIA's estimate of how much time we had before Iran reached the point of no return. As we have seen, Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the IAEA, had "discovered" in 2003 that the Iranians were constructing facilities to enrich uranium. Still, as late as April 2007 the same ElBaradei was pooh-poohing the claims made by Ahmadinejad that Iran already had 3,000 centrifuges in operation. A month later, we learn from Richelson, ElBaradei changed his mind after a few spot inspections. "We believe," ElBaradei now said, that the Iranians "pretty much have the knowledge about how to enrich. From now on, it is simply a question of perfecting that knowledge."

We also learn from Richelson that another expert, Matthew Bunn of Harvard's Center for Science and International Affairs, interpreted the new information the IAEA came up with in April 2007 as meaning that "whether they're six months or a year away, one can debate. But it's not ten years." This chilling estimate of how little time we had to prevent Iran from getting the bomb was similar to the conclusion reached by several Israeli experts (though the official Israeli estimate put the point of no return in 2009).

THEN, IN a trice, everything changed. Even as Bush must surely have been wrestling with the question of whether it would be on his watch that the decision on bombing the Iranian nuclear facilities would have to be made, the world was hit with a different kind of bomb. This took the form of an unclassified summary of a new NIE, published

early last December. Entitled “Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities,” this new document was obviously designed to blow up the near-universal consensus that had flowed from the conclusions reached by the intelligence community in its 2005 NIE.¹ In brief, whereas the NIE of 2005 had assessed “with high confidence that Iran currently is determined to develop nuclear weapons,” the new NIE of 2007 did “not know whether [Iran] currently intends to develop nuclear weapons.”

This startling 180-degree turn was arrived at from new intelligence, offered by the new NIE with “high confidence”: namely, that “in fall 2003 Tehran halted its nuclear-weapons program.” The new NIE was also confident—though only moderately so—that “Tehran had not restarted its nuclear-weapons program as of mid-2007.” And in the most sweeping of its new conclusions, it was even “moderately confident” that “the halt to those activities represents a halt to Iran’s entire nuclear-weapons program.”

Whatever else one might say about the new NIE, one point can be made with “high confidence”: that by leading with the sensational news that Iran had suspended its nuclear-weapons program in 2003, its authors ensured that their entire document would be interpreted as meaning that there was no longer anything to worry about. Of course, being experienced bureaucrats, they took care to protect themselves from this very accusation. For example, after dropping their own bomb on the fear that Iran was hell-bent on getting the bomb, they immediately added “with moderate-to-high confidence that Tehran at a minimum is keeping open the option to develop nuclear weapons.” But as they must have expected, scarcely anyone paid attention to this caveat. And as they must also have expected, even less attention was paid to another self-protective caveat, which—making doubly sure it would pass unnoticed—they relegated to a footnote appended to the lead sentence about the halt:

For the purposes of this Estimate, by “nuclear-weapons program” we mean Iran’s nuclear-weapon design and weaponization work and covert uranium conversion-related and uranium enrichment-related work; we do not mean Iran’s declared civil work related to uranium conversion and enrichment.

Since only an expert could grasp the significance of this cunning little masterpiece of incomprehensible jargon, the damage had been done by the time its dishonesty was exposed.

The first such exposure came from John Bolton,

who before becoming our ambassador to the UN had served as Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, with a special responsibility for preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Donning this hat once again, Bolton charged that the dishonesty of the footnote lay most egregiously in the sharp distinction it drew between military and civilian programs. For, he said,

the enrichment of uranium, which all agree Iran is continuing, is critical to civilian *and* military uses [emphasis added]. Indeed, it has always been Iran’s “civilian” program that posed the main risk of a nuclear “breakout.”

Two other experts, Valerie Lincy, the editor of Iranwatch.org, writing in collaboration with Gary Milhollin, the director of the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control, followed up with an explanation of why the halt of 2003 was much less significant than a layman would inevitably be led to think:

[T]he new report defines “nuclear-weapons program” in a ludicrously narrow way: it confines it to enriching uranium at secret sites or working on a nuclear-weapon design. But the halting of its secret enrichment and weapon-design efforts in 2003 proves only that Iran made a tactical move. It suspended work that, if discovered, would unambiguously reveal intent to build a weapon. It has continued other work, crucial to the ability to make a bomb, that it can pass off as having civilian applications.

Thus, as Lincy and Milhollin went on to write, the main point obfuscated by the footnote was that once Iran accumulated a stockpile of the kind of uranium fit for civilian use, it would “in a matter of months” be able “to convert that uranium . . . to weapons grade.”

YET, IN SPITE of these efforts to demonstrate that the new NIE did not prove that Iran had given up its pursuit of nuclear weapons, just about everyone in the world immediately concluded otherwise, and further concluded that this meant the military option was off the table. George Bush may

¹ Among the principal authors of the new NIE, an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* reported, were “three former State Department officials with previous reputations as ‘hyper-partisan anti-Bush officials,’ according to an intelligence source.” Even without knowing this, a careful reader of the new NIE summary could easily tell that it had been written by opponents of the military option who, moreover, were not so sure that Iran was all that dangerous.

or may not have been planning to order air strikes before leaving office, but now that the justification for doing so had been discredited by his own intelligence agencies, it would be politically impossible for him to go on threatening military action, let alone to take it.

But what about sanctions? In the weeks and months before the new NIE was made public, Bush had been working very hard to get a third and tougher round of sanctions approved by the Security Council. In trying to persuade the Russians and the Chinese to sign on, Bush argued that the failure to enact such sanctions would leave war as the only alternative. Yet if war was now out of the question, and if in any case Iran had for all practical purposes given up its pursuit of nuclear weapons for the foreseeable future, what need was there of sanctions?

Anticipating that this objection would be raised, the White House desperately set out to interpret the new NIE as, precisely, offering “grounds for hope that the problem can be solved diplomatically—without the use of force.” These words by Stephen Hadley, Bush’s National Security Adviser, represented the very first comment on the new NIE to emanate from the White House, and some version of them would be endlessly repeated in the days to come. Joining this campaign of damage control, Sarkozy and Brown issued similar statements, and even Merkel (who had been very reluctant to go along with Bush’s push for another round of sanctions) now declared that it was

dangerous and still grounds for great concern that Iran, in the face of the UN Security Council’s resolutions, continues to refuse to suspend uranium enrichment. . . . The Iranian president’s intolerable agitation against Israel also speaks volumes. . . . It remains a vital interest of the whole world community to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran.

As it happened, Hadley was right about the new NIE, which executed another 180-degree turn—this one, away from the judgment of the 2005 NIE concerning the ineffectiveness of international pressure. Flatly contradicting its “high confidence” in 2005 that Iran was forging ahead “despite its international obligations and international pressure,” the new NIE concluded that the nuclear-weapons program had been halted in 2003 “primarily in response to international pressure.” This indicated that “Tehran’s decisions are guided by a cost-benefit approach rather than a rush to a weapon irrespective of the political, economic, and military costs.”

Never mind that no international pressure to

speaking of was being exerted on Iran in 2003, and that at that point the mullahs were more likely acting out of fear that the Americans, having just invaded Iraq, might come after them next. Never mind, too, that religious and/or ideological passions, which the new NIE pointedly neglected to mention, have over and over again throughout history proved themselves a more powerful driving force than any “cost-benefit approach.” Blithely sweeping aside such considerations, the new NIE was confident that just as the carrot-and-stick approach had allegedly sufficed in the past, so it would suffice in the future to “prompt Tehran to extend the current halt to its nuclear-weapons program.”

The worldview implicit here has been described by Richelson (mainly with North Korea in mind) as the idea that “moral suasion and sustained bargaining are the proven mechanisms of nuclear restraint.” Such a worldview “may be ill-equipped,” he observes delicately,

to accept the idea that certain regimes are incorrigible and negotiate only as a stalling tactic until they have attained a nuclear capability against the United States and other nations that might act against their nuclear programs.

True, the new NIE did at least acknowledge that it would not be easy to induce Iran to extend the halt, “given the linkage many within the leadership probably see between nuclear-weapons development and Iran’s key national-security and foreign-policy objectives.” But it still put its money on a

combination of threats of intensified international scrutiny and pressures, along with opportunities for Iran to achieve its security, prestige, and goals for regional influence in other ways.

It was this pronouncement, and a few others like it, that gave Stephen Hadley “grounds for hope that the problem can be solved diplomatically.” But that it was a false hope was demonstrated by the NIE itself. For if Iran was pursuing nuclear weapons in order to achieve its “key national-security and foreign-policy objectives,” and if those objectives explicitly included (for a start) hegemony in the Middle East and the destruction of the state of Israel, what possible “opportunities” could Tehran be offered to achieve them “in other ways”?

SO MUCH for the carrot. As for the stick, it was no longer big enough to matter, what with the threat of military action ruled out, and what with the case for a third round of sanctions undermined

by the impression stemming from the NIE's main finding that there was nothing left to worry about. Why worry when it was four years since Iran had done any work toward developing the bomb, when the moratorium remained in effect, and when there was no reason to believe that the program would be resumed in the near future?²

What is more, in continuing to insist that the Iranians must be stopped from developing the bomb and that this could be done by nonmilitary means, the Bush administration and its European allies were lagging behind a new consensus within the American foreign-policy establishment that had already been forming even before the publication of the new NIE. Whereas the old consensus was based on the proposition that (in Senator John McCain's pungent formulation) "the only thing worse than bombing Iran was letting Iran get the bomb," the emerging new consensus held the opposite—that the only thing worse than letting Iran get the bomb was bombing Iran.

What led to this reversal was a gradual loss of faith in the carrot-and-stick approach. As one who had long since rejected this faith and who had been excoriated for my apostasy by more than one member of the foreign-policy elites, I never thought I would live to see the day when these very elites would come to admit that diplomacy and sanctions had been given a fair chance and that they had accomplished nothing but to buy Iran more time.³ The lesson drawn from this new revelation was, however, a different matter.

It was in the course of a public debate with one of the younger members of the foreign-policy establishment that I first chanced upon the change in view. Knowing that he never deviated by so much as an inch from the conventional wisdom of the moment within places like the Council on Foreign Relations and the Brookings Institution, I had expected him to defend the carrot-and-stick approach and to attack me as a warmonger for contending that bombing was the only way to stop the mullahs from getting the bomb. Instead, to my great surprise, he took the position that there was really no need to stop them in the first place, since even if they had the bomb they could be deterred from using it, just as effectively as the Soviets and the Chinese had been deterred during the cold war.

Without saying so in so many words, then, my opponent was acknowledging that diplomacy and sanctions had proved to be a failure, and that there was no point in pursuing them any further. But so as to avoid drawing the logical conclusion—namely, that military action had now become neces-

sary—he simply abandoned the old establishment assumption that Iran must at all costs be prevented from developing nuclear weapons, adopting in its place the complacent idea that we could learn to live with an Iranian bomb.

In response, I argued that deterrence could not be relied upon with a regime ruled by Islamofascist revolutionaries who not only were ready to die for their beliefs but cared less about protecting their people than about the spread of their ideology and their power. If the mullahs got the bomb, I said, it was not they who would be deterred, but we.

So little did any of this shake my opponent that I came away from our debate with the grim realization that the President's continued insistence on the dangers posed by an Iranian bomb would more and more fall on deaf ears—ears that would soon be made even deaf by the new NIE's assurance that Iran was no longer hell-bent on acquiring nuclear weapons after all. There might be two different ideas competing here—one, that we could live with an Iranian bomb; the other, that there would be no Iranian bomb to live with—but the widespread acceptance of either would not only preclude the military option but would sooner or later put an end even to the effort to stop the mullahs by nonmilitary means.

AND YET there remained something else, or rather someone else, to factor into the equation: the perennially "misunderestimated" George W. Bush, a man who knew evil when he saw it and who had the courage and the determination to do battle against it. This was also a man who, far more than most politicians, said what he meant and meant what he said. And what he had said at least twice before was that if we permitted Iran to build a nuclear arsenal, people fifty years from now would look back and wonder how we of this generation could have allowed such a thing to happen,

² It is worth noting that a number of Israeli experts—including Ephraim Halevy, the former (and very dovish) director of the Mossad—were convinced that the halt had lasted only about two years, that the program had been resumed, probably in 2005, and that it was still up and running.

³ That negotiation was merely a tactic used by Iran to buy time was not idle speculation. As we learn from Richelson: "Iranian nuclear negotiator Hassan Rouhani told his nation's Supreme Cultural Revolution Council in September 2005 that Iran, in dealing with the IAEA, had agreed to suspend activities only in areas where it was not experiencing technical problems, and that the Isfahan uranium-conversion facility was completed while negotiating with the [European Union]. Rouhan informed the council that 'while we were talking with the Europeans in Tehran, we were installing equipment in parts of the facility. . . . [B]y creating a calm environment, we were able to complete the work.'"

and they would rightly judge us as harshly as we today judge the British and the French for what they did at Munich in 1938. It was because I had found it hard to understand why Bush would put himself so squarely in the dock of history on this issue if he were resigned to an Iran in possession of nuclear weapons, or even of the ability to build them, that I predicted in these pages, and went on predicting elsewhere, that he would not retire from office before resorting to the military option.

But then came the new NIE. To me it seemed obvious that it represented another ambush by an intelligence community that had consistently tried to sabotage Bush's policies through a series of damaging leaks and was now trying to prevent him from ever taking military action against Iran. To others, however, it seemed equally obvious that Bush, far from being ambushed, had welcomed the new NIE precisely because it provided him with a perfect opportunity to begin distancing himself from the military option.⁴

But I could not for the life of me believe that Bush intended to fly in the face of the solemn promise he had made in his 2002 State of the Union address:

We'll be deliberate, yet time is not on our side. I will not wait on events, while dangers gather. I will not stand by, as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons.

To which he had added shortly afterward in a speech at West Point: "If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long."

How, I wondered, could Bush not know that in the case of Iran he was running a very great risk of waiting too long? And if he was truly ready to run that risk, why, in a press conference the day after the new NIE came out, did he put himself in the historical dock yet again by repeating what he had said several times before about the judgment that would be passed on this generation in the future if Iran were to acquire a nuclear weapon?

If Iran shows up with a nuclear weapon at some point in time, the world is going to say, what happened to them in 2007? How come they couldn't see the impending danger? What caused them not to understand that a country that once had a weapons program could reconstitute the weapons program? How come they couldn't see that the important first step in developing a weapon is the capacity to be able to enrich uranium? How come they didn't know

that with that capacity, that knowledge could be passed on to a covert program? What blinded them to the realities of the world? And it's not going to happen on my watch.

"IT'S NOT going to happen on my watch." What else could this mean if not that Bush was preparing to meet "the impending danger" in what he must by now have concluded was the only way it could be averted?

The only alternative that seemed even remotely plausible to me was that he might be fixing to outsource the job to the Israelis. After all, even if, by now, it might have become politically impossible for us to take military action, the Israelis could not afford to sit by while a regime pledged to wipe them off the map was equipping itself with nuclear weapons and the missiles to deliver them. For unless Iran could be stopped before acquiring a nuclear capability, the Israelis would be faced with only two choices: either strike first, or pray that the fear of retaliation would deter the Iranians from beating them to the punch. Yet a former president of Iran, Hashemi Rafsanjani, had served notice that his country would not be deterred by the fear of retaliation:

If a day comes when the world of Islam is duly equipped with the arms Israel has in its possession, . . . application of an atomic bomb would not leave anything in Israel, but the same thing would just produce damages in the Muslim world.

If this was the view of even a supposed moderate like Rafsanjani, how could the Israelis depend upon the mullahs to refrain from launching a first strike? The answer was that they could not. Bernard Lewis, the leading contemporary authority on the culture of the Islamic world, has explained why:

⁴ A typically conspiratorial version of this view, circulating through the Middle East, holds that Bush actually *arranged* for the new NIE, as a cover for capitulating to Iran. Evidently acting on this interpretation, the Sunni regimes (including Saudi Arabia and Egypt) that were expected by Condoleezza Rice to form a coalition against Shi'ite Iran once the U.S. got the "peace process" going between Israel and the Palestinians (hence the meeting she arranged at Annapolis) have instead been scrambling in various ways to come to terms with Tehran. As Gerald Steinberg of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs pointed out: "Within two weeks following publication of the NIE report, . . . Egypt moved to improve relations with Iran." What was even more extraordinary, "Saudi Arabia welcomed Iranian President Ahmadinejad to Mecca." The effects of the NIE were also manifest in China, which "signed a major contract on energy development and supply with Iran," as well as in Russia, which, after stalling on a long-promised delivery, "quickly dispatched two shipments of nuclear fuel for the Bushehr nuclear reactor."

MAD, mutual assured destruction, [was effective] right through the cold war. Both sides had nuclear weapons. Neither side used them, because both sides knew the other would retaliate in kind. This will not work with a religious fanatic [like Ahmadinejad]. For him, mutual assured destruction is not a deterrent, it is an inducement. We know already that [the mullahs ruling Iran] do not give a damn about killing their own people in great numbers. We have seen it again and again. In the final scenario, and this applies all the more strongly if they kill large numbers of their own people, they are doing them a favor. They are giving them a quick free pass to heaven and all its delights.

Under the aegis of such an attitude, even in the less extreme variant that may have been held by some of Ahmadinejad's colleagues among the regime's rulers, mutual assured destruction would turn into a very weak reed. Understanding that, the Israelis would be presented with an irresistible incentive to preempt—and so, too, would the Iranians. Either way, a nuclear exchange would become inevitable.

What would happen then? In a recently released study, Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies argues that Rafsanjani had it wrong. In the grisly scenario Cordesman draws, tens of millions would indeed die, but Israel—despite the decimation of its civilian population and the destruction of its major cities—would survive, even if just barely, as a functioning society. Not so Iran, and not its “key Arab neighbors,” particularly Egypt and Syria, which Cordesman thinks Israel would also have to target in order “to ensure that no other power can capitalize on an Iranian strike.” Furthermore, Israel might be driven in desperation to go after the oil wells, refineries, and ports in the Gulf.

“Being contained within the region,” writes Martin Walker of UPI in his summary of Cordesman's study, “such a nuclear exchange might not be Armageddon for the human race.” To me it seems doubtful that it could be confined to the Middle East. But even if it were, the resulting horrors would still be far greater than even the direst consequences that might follow from bombing Iran *before* it reaches the point of no return.

In the worst case of this latter scenario, Iran would retaliate by increasing the trouble it is already making for us in Iraq and by attacking Israel with missiles armed with non-nuclear warheads but possibly containing biological and/or chemical weapons. There would also be a vast increase in the

price of oil, with catastrophic consequences for every economy in the world, very much including our own. And there would be a deafening outcry from one end of the earth to the other against the inescapable civilian casualties. Yet, bad as all this would be, it does not begin to compare with the gruesome consequences of a nuclear exchange between Israel and Iran, even if those consequences were to be far less extensive than Cordesman anticipates.

Which is to say that, as between bombing Iran to prevent it from getting the bomb and letting Iran get the bomb, there is simply no contest.

BUT THIS still does not answer the question of who should do the bombing. Tempting as it must be for George Bush to sit back and let the Israelis do the job, there are considerations that should give him pause. One is that no matter what he would say, the whole world would regard the Israelis as a surrogate for the United States, and we would become as much the target of the ensuing recriminations both at home and abroad as we would if we had done the job ourselves.

To make matters worse, the indications are that it would be very hard for the Israeli air force, superb though it is, to pull the mission off. Thus, an analysis by two members of the Security Studies Program at MIT concluded that while “the Israeli air force now possesses the capability to destroy even well-hardened targets in Iran with some degree of confidence,” the problem is that for the mission to succeed, all of the many contingencies involved would have to go right. Hence an Israeli attempt could end with the worst of all possible outcomes: retaliatory measures by the Iranians even as their nuclear program remained unscathed. We, on the other hand, would have a much bigger margin of error and a much better chance of setting their program back by a minimum of five or ten years and at best wiping it out altogether.

The upshot is that if Iran is to be prevented from becoming a nuclear power, it is the United States that will have to do the preventing, to do it by means of a bombing campaign, and (because “If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long”) to do it soon.

When I first predicted a year or so ago that Bush would bomb Iran's nuclear facilities once he had played out the futile diplomatic string, the obstacles that stood in his way were great but they did not strike me as insurmountable. Now, thanks in large part to the new NIE, they have grown so formidable that I can only stick by my prediction with

what the NIE itself would describe as “low-to-moderate confidence.” For Bush is right about the resemblance between 2008 and 1938. In 1938, as Winston Churchill later said, Hitler could still have been stopped at a relatively low price and many millions of lives could have been saved if England and France had not deceived themselves about the realities of their situation. *Mutatis mutandis*, it is the same in 2008, when Iran can still be stopped from getting the bomb and even more millions of lives can be saved—but only provided that we summon up the courage to see what is staring us in the face and then act on what we see.

Unless we do, the forces that are blindly working to ensure that Iran will get the bomb are likely to prevail even against the clear-sighted determination of George W. Bush, just as the forces of appeasement did against Churchill in 1938. In which case, we had all better pray that there will be enough time for the next President to discharge the responsibility that Bush will have been forced to pass on, and that this successor will also have the clarity and the courage to discharge it. If not—God help us all—the stage will have been set for the outbreak of a nuclear war that will become as inescapable then as it is avoidable now.