

Defining Democracy Down

Engaging an enemy diplomatically used to be quiet business, while committing to alliances was a matter of public debate. The Bush administration has changed that.

By Leon Hadar

IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS of American diplomacy, attempting to open channels to a foe would become the stuff of behind-the-scenes negotiations conducted far away from the maddening media so as to transcend the passions and prejudices of domestic politics. At the same time, deciding whether to commit the United States to come to the defense of foreign nations—those entangling alliances that President George Washington warned against in his Farewell Address—has been always the focus of open and heated congressional debates. The logic operating in both cases was simple: if you wanted to avoid being drawn into unnecessary and costly wars, use covert diplomacy to defuse tensions and win congressional approval of a military commitment.

But under President George W. Bush, the United States seems to have entered a post-diplomatic age when it comes to opening a dialogue with an adversary, as highlighted by the White House's recent decision to turn what could have been a potential detente with Iran into another media-spinning operation. At the same time, the Bush administration is also entangling the United States in a murky alliance with a foreign friend, committing us to protect Israel from an Iranian attack, a dramatic step that has received no attention on Capitol Hill.

For several years, I've been promoting the idea that Washington adopt a realpolitik approach to dealing with Iran, including opening a direct diplo-

matic dialogue with Tehran aimed at resolving some of the major differences between the two governments. In particular, I've been critical of the Bush administration's neocon-driven policy of promoting regime change in Iran and of its rejection of diplomatic overtures from Iran. Indeed, in an article in these pages I called on President Bush to follow the example of another hawkish Republican president, Richard Nixon, who reshaped global politics by going to communist China, and adopt a similar strategy by going to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

But drawing a historical analogy between the recent move by the Bush-Rice team to agree to talk with Iran (under certain conditions) and the decision by the Nixon-Kissinger crew to open diplomatic negotiations with China is like comparing Ann Coulter to H.L. Mencken.

The secret negotiations with China were a major step in a coherent strategy aimed at forming a Sino-American alliance to counter the Soviets. Nixon and Henry Kissinger were determined to re-establish diplomatic links with Beijing and ensured that their project would succeed by conducting secret negotiations with the Chinese and preventing the powerful China Lobby from sabotaging them. The Nixon-Kissinger policy was like a powerful bulldozer running over all the obstacles as it pressed ahead toward the final destination.

But Bush and Rice resemble the disoriented drivers of a broken-down vehicle who are not sure what address they should be looking for. After driving around town for hours, they are relieved to discover a gas station where they hope to get some directions. Indeed, when it comes to the Bush administration's policy towards Iran, much of what is described as diplomacy is nothing more than an attempt to muddle through one crisis after another, that is, to come up with ad hoc responses that reflect the existing political pressures at home and the balance of power abroad while trying to spin the latest developments as another example of "regaining the diplomatic initiative," the equivalent of a "tipping point" in Iraq.

In the aftermath of the Iraq invasion, talk in Washington turned to regime change in Tehran. In fact, at that stage Washington dismissed diplomatic advances from Iran and expressed confidence that the Iranian people would soon topple the mullahs. When Iraq turned into a mess and the Iranians elected a populist president, the military option was placed on the backburner while the Europeans were encouraged to negotiate with the Iranians on their alleged nuclear program. The Americans were hoping that the failure of the talks with the EU-3 (Britain, France, Germany) would create the conditions for winning support from the UN Security Council for punishing Iran. The talks indeed collapsed—but then rising oil prices helped to strengthen

Iran's bargaining power and made it less likely that Russia and China would support sanctions.

It was in that stage that the perplexed U.S. drivers saw the lights of a gas station, and since real men don't ask for directions, Bush told Condi to get out of the car and find out where they should make the next turn. With Britain's Tony Blair and Germany's Angela Merkel playing the role of the friendly attendants, Bush's diplomatic sidekick discovered that Military Drive, Sanctions Road, and No-Direct-U.S.-Negotiations-With-Iran Alley were all leading to dead ends. If anything, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's letter to Bush, which was dismissed by the Americans as nothing more than a publicity stunt, proved to be a successful publicity stunt that increased the pressure on Bush and Rice to "do something" just as wise men in Washington (including Dr. K himself) were suggesting that the time had come to talk with Iran. That explains why Bush and Rice are now turning on to Direct Negotiations Avenue while portraying it as a major diplomatic triumph.

But this route will probably lead to another diplomatic dead end since the Americans and the Iranians are entering into the negotiations with totally different expectations. The Bushies have yet to devise a coherent strategy that could lead to a deal involving not only the nuclear issue but common interests in Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Afghanistan, and the Persian Gulf. Iran hopes that Washington will recognize it as a major player in the Persian Gulf, an idea that challenges the notion of U.S. hegemony in the Middle East. What Bush and Rice want is for Iran to "do a Libya" and give up its entire nuclear program in exchange for some carrots. That is not going to happen. And it is certainly difficult to imagine how the two sides would be able to reach a compromise with the talks taking place as the world is

watching, including the powerful Israel lobby, which has been a driving force behind the efforts to isolate Tehran.

Israel's concerns have been taken into consideration as the Bushies have muddled toward the talks with Iran. While the Americans have indicated that they won't pursue a military option in dealing with Iran for the duration of the talks, the Israelis have warned of an Iranian "initial nuclear capability" between 2005 and 2007 and maintain that they will use all means available to prevent that from happening. Since Tehran takes it for granted that any Israeli decision to attack its nuclear sites would receive a U.S. green light, Washington needs to ensure that the Israelis would not do just that and force the United States into a military confrontation it wants to avoid, at least for now. It is in this context, as a signal to Israel to stay its hand, that one should consider President Bush's recent statements that the United States is ready to protect Israel in case it is attacked by Iran. "The threat from Iran is, of course, their stated objective to destroy our strong ally Israel," Bush declared in March. "That's a threat, a serious threat. It's a threat to world peace; it's a threat, in essence, to a strong alliance. I made it clear, I'll make it clear again, that we will use military might to protect our ally, Israel." Bush reiterated the same point during a press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in Washington in June. "Israel is a close friend and ally of the United States, and in the event of any attack on Israel, the United States will come to Israel's aid," Bush said. "The United States is strongly committed, and I'm strongly committed, to the security of Israel as a vibrant, Jewish state."

Unlike NATO, Japan, and South Korea, the United States doesn't have a formal military alliance with Israel, so it's amazing that Bush's stated commitment to "use military might to protect

our ally, Israel" received so little attention in Washington—or for that matter in Israel, whose leaders have always stressed an aversion to entrusting their nation's security to outsiders, including the United States. Some analysts have raised the possibility that Bush's vow to defend Israel from an attack by Iran is part of an effort by Washington to persuade Israel to refrain from officially declaring itself a nuclear power if and when Iran goes nuclear. To put it differently, instead of moving to create a regional deterrence system with Iran—the approximate parallel would be India-Pakistan, both of which gained the bomb in 1998—the Bush administration is hoping that Israeli leaders would agree to "accept a U.S. pledge of protection from a nuclear Iran under a broad American deterrence umbrella" and thus make it less likely that other Middle Eastern countries would decide to acquire nuclear military capability, speculated *National Journal's* Paul Starobin.

Whatever the Bush administration is contemplating with regard to the evolving Israel-Iran nuclear game of chicken—blunt warning to Iran's leaders? Threatening to retaliate against Iran if it attacks Israel? Providing Israel with a nuclear umbrella?—there are no indications that it is ready to consult Congress as it muddles toward a very costly military commitment whose parameters are not clear. Is it possible that Bush is not even considering the implications of his new commitments to Israel and is just trying to buy some time for talks with Iran so as to ensure that resolving the nuclear crisis with Iran and the mess in Iraq will be left to his successor? Isn't it time that those inquiring minds on Capitol Hill would want to know the answers to these questions? ■

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Arts & Letters

FILM

[Cars]

Gentlemen, Start Your Computers

By Steve Sailer

"CARS," the G-rated computer-generated cartoon from the normally reliable John Lasseter of Pixar Animation Studios, takes place in an alternate universe: an America populated only by talking vehicles. Owen Wilson blandly voices Lightning McQueen, a rookie NASCAR racecar who, on his way to California for the climactic contest of the stock-car season, gets waylaid in the Arizona burgh of Radiator Springs, a once-hopping Route 66 stopping point that has been Nowheresville since the new interstate bypassed it in 1966. Its rusty but truehearted denizens, such as the town doctor, a 1951 Hudson Hornet voiced by Paul Newman, teach him important life lessons.

Although the Pixar animators do everything imaginable to infuse the cars with personalities, automobiles still prove ill-chosen agents for two hours of anthropomorphizing. In particular, Luigi and Guido, the Italian-stereotype Fiats working at the Pirelli tire shop, suffer from the autos' lack of hands with which to gesticulate vociferously. A more subtle deficiency of this kids' movie is that there are no kids in the factory-built world of "Cars."

And then there's the fanatically precise scenery. One of Jorge Luis Borges's funnier conceits was the fictional Chinese emperor so adamant about his imperial

cartographers providing more detail that he eventually had them draw a map of China exactly as large as China itself. "Cars" is similarly unclear on the concept of artistic abstraction. Back in 1995's "Toy Story," Lasseter's computer-graphic techniques were charming in their creative simplification and exaggeration of reality. Now the technology has evolved to where, through a prodigious expenditure of talent, time, and money, the CGI desert in "Cars" looks virtually as photo-realistically genuine as the actual desert in, say, the modestly budgeted "Road Warrior"—and, therefore, almost as pointless as the emperor's 1:1 scale map.

When enough billions are on the table, perhaps even Lasseter, one of the true heroes of American popular culture, can lose sight of what has made his art effective.

Pixar's history is famously heartwarming. Purchased by Apple founder Steve Jobs in 1986, Pixar first gained notice that year with Lasseter's 150-second short about mother and baby desk lamps, "Luxo Jr." Two decades ago, everybody knew that computer animation was the next big thing, but it was then skull-crushingly slow to create. Despite the tedium of waiting for 1980s processors, Lasseter infused human warmth into his computer images. Ultimately, Lasseter's 15 years of effort paid off with the superb blockbuster "Toy Story."

Pixar became the reincarnation of Walt Disney's old studio—a specialty shop crafting only high quality, non-edgy 3-D family films, such as "Finding Nemo" and "The Incredibles." Finally, last January, Jobs sold Pixar to Disney for \$7.4 billion, with Lasseter as the prize human asset.

Will the money ruin Pixar? It's disquieting that the Disney 2-D animation renaissance that began with "The Little Mermaid" in 1989 and hit its peak with

"Beauty and the Beast" sputtered out after "The Lion King" became a billion-dollar property in 1994. Animators who once had few cares besides wowing each other with imagination and comedy in their dingy warehouse in Glendale quickly aged into profit centers nearly paralyzed with fiscal responsibility in their new architectural showcase at Disney headquarters in Burbank.

Although Pixar films use the highest technology, the company sends numerous employees each year to Robert McKee's screenwriting seminars (which were parodied in Charlie Kaufman's "Adaptation"). McKee gets his traditionalist ideas about storytelling from Aristotle and Golden Age Hollywood films like "Casablanca." McKee's adages have served Pixar well in making their films focus on narrative and character rather than techno-nerdisms or one-liners.

Perhaps Pixar's McKee formula may be reaching diminishing returns, though, as "Cars" turns out to have the same plot as the 1991 Michael J. Fox romantic comedy "Doc Hollywood." Moreover, McKee's emphasis on drama has been taken too much to heart in "Cars," as the six screenwriters forgot to include any jokes until the hilarious end credits. Stock-car racing, which is a sort of covert ethnic-pride rally for people who aren't allowed to hold ethnic-pride rallies, is treated too reverently for a film that purports to be a comedy.

With luck, though, "Cars" will turn out to be a minor detour for Lasseter and Pixar. Although lacking inspiration, "Cars" remains an above-average film, delivering intelligent detailing—because it still takes 17 hours to render each frame, years are available for fine-tuning—patriotic nostalgia, and uplifting sentiments about teamwork and humility. ■

Rated G.