

Mission Improbable

Even the neocons, who long for war with Iran, concede it isn't feasible.

By **Scott McConnell**

THOSE SEEKING INDICATIONS that George W. Bush's "global war on terror" will next target Iran have had much to point to. With little prompting beyond the newly elected Iranian president Ahmadinejad's inflammatory statements about wiping Israel off the map, a robust 57 percent of Americans told pollsters that if diplomacy failed, they would back military action against Iran's nuclear program. (Veteran Democratic pollster Pat Caddell remarked that he had never seen support for military action spike so quickly without a presidential speech or comparable high-level public mobilization.)

If the White House has been relatively circumspect, the War Party punditocracy has been thumping. Fox News host Sean Hannity has been calling the Iranian president whose name few Americans know "the new Hitler of our time"—Saddam no longer being suitable for the role. Presidential hopefuls of both parties are auditioning as tough guys: John McCain asserts that a nuclear-armed Iran is "unacceptable" while Hillary Clinton knocks the Bush administration for "outsourcing" its Iran policy to diplomacy-addicted Europeans. Other parallels to the Iraq run-up abound: the publication of books highlighting lurid accusations against Iran (including the absurd charge that Iran actually plotted 9/11 with Osama bin Laden) and the emergence of Iranian ethnic separatist or exile groups agitating inside the Beltway for American military action. Of course, there are bellicose editorials from *The Weekly Standard* and *Wall Street Journal*.

But the differences are worth noting. The Iraq War was an intellectuals' project, and the neoconservatives pushed it vigorously. Republican resistance was minimal. On Iran today, there isn't the same lockstep momentum. For instance, in early February, the American Enterprise Institute held an event devoted to the Iranian nuclear issue—a packed room, a charismatic right-wing senator (Kansas Sam Brownback) as keynote speaker, panelists who had been championing a hard line against Tehran for years. Representatives of various Iranian exile groups circled the room, while AEI's resident blonde war goddess, Danielle Pletka, presided. And yet no one on the podium could bring himself to say that an American military solution had much chance of successfully resolving the problem.

Brownback, introduced by Pletka as "an activist" and a "true believer," spoke of the steady erosion of human rights in Iran, ticking through the data points about arrests and the regime's rhetorical belligerence. But regime change could not be a military exercise. Brownback called instead for the U.S. to flood the Persian landscape with videos and satellite broadcasts—in effect, a Cold War-type political strategy. As models for change he mentioned Poland's Solidarity and the campaigns of the recently deceased Coretta Scott King. Asked to comment on John McCain's call for military action as the ultimate resort, the senator said, "Change happens from within on Iran. ... I don't see a viable military option."

It's not only Brownback. Robert Kagan, the hawkish neoconservative author and

Washington Post columnist who has the distinction of co-authoring dozens of articles and editorials with *The Weekly Standard's* Bill Kristol, including the original pieces calling for war against Iraq, writes that the likely costs of a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities "outweigh the benefits."

That's almost certainly true. While air strikes against Iran would have no assurance of eliminating that country's hardened and dispersed nuclear program, Iran would have many retaliatory cards to play through Shi'ite militias or terrorist groups in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Israel, and the Strait of Hormuz. Unless the U.S. is ready to accept, as an outcome of inconclusive air strikes, oil at \$200 a barrel, many more body bags coming home from Iraq, and Pakistan's nuclear arsenal falling into the hands of God knows who, it must recognize the military option is a very poor one.

The neoconservative fallback position, now touted by Condoleezza Rice, is democratic "regime change"—ideological and political subversion of the mullahs' government. But it isn't very promising either. While large numbers (though not necessarily a majority) of Iranians yearn for the end of the mullahcracy, Radio Free Europe-type efforts run smack up against the dominant fact of Iran's political culture: a distaste for foreign meddling that might seem paranoid were it not for Iran's actual history. Few Americans have bad memories of the Shah's dictatorship, but Iranians do: the CIA overthrow of Mossadegh, a flawed but popular elected

liberal nationalist, in 1953 and his replacement by the Shah is a seminal event in Iranian consciousness. The throngs that ousted the dictator 25 years later were likely the largest revolutionary crowds in the history of the world. In *The Persian Puzzle*, Kenneth Pollack describes the Shah's regime, supported by a murderous secret police, as a personality cult on the level of Mao's China or North Korea. Iranians may yearn for greater freedom and more ties to the West, but revolutionary movements tainted by an American connection are likely to fail. For all the neocon talk of "the radios" and beaming in freedom messages by satellite, Iran is quite unlike Eastern Europe under Communist domination because the nationalist and patriot card can be effectively played against American initiatives.

If military options are unpalatable and regime change through broadcasts and covert subventions to labor unions won't work, we are inevitably back to how "unacceptable" an Iranian nuclear program really is. In Washington, there

Bolton acknowledges that "for the United States the threat posed by Iran is not direct" but that the Iranians could "strike at our friends and allies in the region." State Department officials, with characteristic precision, emphasize this: "A nuclear armed Iran would represent a direct threat to U.S. forces and allies in the region," said Robert G. Joseph, undersecretary of state for arms control and international security. The threat is not to New York or Cleveland, but to U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf or, given Ahmadinejad's rhetoric, to Tel Aviv. And obviously any Iranian nuclear action against American forces would bring forth a rapid and horrific retaliation.

But while the prospect of an Iranian threat to Israel may be new, the subject of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East is not. And though one wouldn't guess it by their present rhetoric, it is a topic to which American neoconservatives, among others, have given serious thought. More than 30 years ago, Robert W. Tucker—then becoming notorious for

attractive option neither for Israel nor the U.S. The solution was for Israel to adopt, rather formally, a nuclear deterrent so that its strategic relationship with the Arabs could more resemble the nuclear standoff between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. "Far from proving destabilizing," Tucker wrote, "a nuclear balance between Israel and the major Arab states would have a stabilizing effect. On the Arab side, there would no longer be reason to fear that Israel might be tempted to use its nuclear deterrent for expansionist purposes. On the Israeli side the present preoccupation with secure borders could markedly diminish ... not only would the justification of holding on to the territorial buffers be stripped away but also the *security* arguments for opposing the creation of a Palestinian state (the security arguments being the only ones that deserve a hearing)."

These words were written, of course, before Israel settled a quarter million people on the territory of a prospective Palestinian state, rendering the matter far more difficult. But a nuclear balance between Israel and the Arab states is logically no more difficult to contemplate than a nuclear balance between Tel Aviv and Tehran, which has no historic or territorial grievances against Israel.

Twenty-four years later, in "Thinking the Unthinkable about the Middle East," *Commentary's* Gabriel Schoenfeld addressed Tucker's argument. A nuclear-armed Iran, Schoenfeld claimed, would compel Israeli nuclear forces to be on a constant hair-trigger status, ready to launch on the mere warning of an Iranian attack because Israel was too small to absorb a first strike and consider its options. But this argument underestimates Israel's present strategic force, which includes submarines and an air force. Israel has the kind of "survivable" nuclear force that makes a stable regime of deterrence with its enemies possible.

It is natural that Israelis would feel

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are a surprising number of analysts, even Bush supporters, who consider an Iranian bomb inevitable at some point—off the record that is. And for some it's not off the record: William Odom, former head of the National Security Agency, asserts we should offer the Iranians the bomb if they want it, noting that only under the Bush administration has nonproliferation been used to foster regional destabilization.

The Odom assertion underscores a salient point: an Iranian bomb or two does not constitute a great danger to the United States. Even superhawk John

his brazen essays about seizing the oil fields in the Persian Gulf—addressed the topic in a lengthy article in *Commentary*. The main focus of "Israel and the United States: From Dependence to Nuclear Weapons" was Israeli dependence on the U.S.—blatantly exposed by Washington's arms airlift during the Yom Kippur War. Less than two years later, South Vietnam, the ultimate American dependency, fell to the Communists, raising the question of how much a dependent ally could count on Washington in the crunch. Tucker's conclusion in 1975: Israeli dependence on the United States for its survival is an

more comfortable as the only state in the Mideast with a nuclear arsenal, and Israeli spokesmen have honed the melodramatic soundbite that an Iranian bomb would constitute “an existential threat” to the Jewish state. Well, yes, it would. Existential threats are, it is regrettable to say, what the nuclear age is all about. For 40 years, the United States faced an existential threat from the Soviet Union, and the Soviet regime in turn faced an existential threat from the United States. Either side could end the meaningful national life of the other—but only at the cost of losing its own. In lamenting the possible emergence of an “existential threat” from Iran, Israel is not complaining about anything that other countries have not had to live with for the past two generations.

In January, *Jane's Intelligence Review* reported that some Israeli strategists are wondering whether Israel's current strategic doctrine, which mandates that Tel Aviv maintain absolute superiority over any potential rival, is really worth the trouble it causes. According to *Jane's*, some Israeli defense intellectuals are arguing that the requirement “can create enemies where previously they did not exist.” The alternative is for Israel to adopt a strategy of deterrence, the same doctrine that saw the United States through the Cold War, the doctrine Robert Tucker prescribed for the Mideast 30 years ago.

Much will be revealed in the coming months. *The Weekly Standard* has now labeled the Iran nuclear crisis the “defining test of Bush's war presidency.” (The previous test, laid down by Bill Kristol in September 2001, was Iraq. Bush followed *The Standard's* advice and launched an invasion, thus “passing” with flying colors.) But even in neoconland, *The Standard's* view that the Iran problem has a military solution is not widely accepted. Americans who want to get through the Bush presidency without igniting a world war must hope that it never is. ■

Six Ports and a Storm

The Dubai debacle shows Americans looking inward.

By Leon Hadar

IT'S NOT EVERY NEWS CYCLE that the columnists for the anti-interventionist Antiwar.com and for the internationalist op-ed page of the *New York Times* find themselves echoing the same line-of-the-day spun by the media masters of George W. Bush's White House. Those lawmakers who have criticized the Bush administration's decision to allow a company owned by the government of Dubai—which is part of the United Arab Emirates—to purchase a British company, Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation—which now has the contract to operate six major U.S. ports—were “Kicking Arabs in Their Teeth,” screamed the headline of a column by the *Times'* in-house neoconservative David Brooks, a staunch supporter of the war in Iraq. Meanwhile, Justin Raimondo, the long-time libertarian editor of Antiwar.com and a persistent opponent of the military adventure in Mesopotamia, accused those opposed to the deal with the Arab-owned company, Dubai Ports World, of “hating Arabs.”

Is “Dubai a hotbed of radical Islamist agitation?” asked Raimondo, who sounding like the “freedom is on the march in the Middle East” neocons noted that “Dubai is the one city in the Middle East that is the most like America in that it is a symbol—the symbol—of the Arab world's entry into modernity.” Brooks, transforming himself into a born-again Arabist, denied that the

Arab city of Dubai was “a bastion of Taliban radicalism,” describing it as “a modernizing, globalizing place.”

It would be an exaggeration to describe this brief political romance between libertarians and neocons as a sign of a major realignment in American politics. That Sen. Hillary Clinton—who would probably go ballistic if the government targeted Arab-Americans for security checks at airports (“racial profiling”)—would rally against permitting an Arab-owned company to run American port terminals because it's, well, Arab (“national profiling”?) smacks of pure political opportunism. Indeed, there is little doubt that the Democrats are exploiting the controversy to “get to the right of George Bush,” as suggested by Charles Krauthammer, who in the name of national security would permit the U.S. government to listen your phone conversations and torture suspected terrorists but who backs the Dubai deal that could potentially endanger U.S. security by making it easier for terrorists from the Middle East to infiltrate American ports.

What is more intriguing has been the anti-Bush rebellion over the port issue by Republicans on Capitol Hill and around the country. “Dear Mr. President: In regards to selling American ports to the United Arab Emirates, not just NO but HELL NO!” Rep. Sue Myrick, a Republican from North Carolina, wrote