

[welcome to the club]

Apocalypse Not

Stalin's nuclear arsenal wasn't the end of the world.
Ahmadinejad's won't be either.

By Michael C. Desch

THE AMERICAN INTELLIGENCE community has not yet concluded that Iran has even decided to develop a nuclear weapon, but the public debate has moved on to another question: what happens if it does?

There is an overwhelming consensus that it would be an unmitigated disaster for the Islamic Republic of Iran to develop its nuclear program to the point that it could produce a weapon. As Israel's new prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, warned *The Atlantic's* Jeffrey Goldberg, "You don't want a messianic apocalyptic cult controlling atomic bombs. When the wide-eyed believer gets hold of the reins of power and the weapons of mass death, then the entire world should start worrying, and that is what is happening in Iran."

Despite many disagreements with Netanyahu and his xenophobic foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, President Obama shares the view that "there is no greater threat to Israel—or to the peace and stability of the region—than Iran." As he told the American Israel Public Affairs Committee while campaigning last May,

The Iranian regime supports violent extremists and challenges us across the region. It pursues a nuclear capability that could spark

a dangerous arms race and raise the prospect of a transfer of nuclear know-how to terrorists. Its president denies the Holocaust and threatens to wipe Israel off the map. The danger from Iran is grave, it is real, and my goal will be to eliminate this threat.

To be sure, America's new Democratic president and Israel's new right-wing government have very different strategies for preventing Iran from going ballistic. Obama and much of the international community think that engagement with the Iranians is the best way to prevent the Persian Gulf doomsday clock from ticking down to zero. In contrast, many in Israel, and a significant number of the Jewish state's American supporters, believe that only the Gideon's sword of a pre-emptive military strike will end the mad mullahs' race to Armageddon.

Of course, not everyone shares the apocalyptic rhetoric of the "strike-before-it's-too-late" crowd. Indeed, less fevered minds understand that even if Iran developed a rudimentary nuclear capability, the United States and Israel would have a huge missile advantage. According to the Federation of American Scientists, the U.S. has over 5,000 warheads deployed and a large number

in reserve, while estimates of the Israeli stockpile range from 80 to 200 nuclear devices. At present, Iran has none and, even under worst-case scenarios, is unlikely to have more than a handful in the years to come.

Warheads without a way to deliver them aren't much use. In this respect, Iran is a nuclear pygmy: it has no long-range missiles that can reach the United States. Its medium-range missile capability, which can theoretically reach Israel, is unreliable. In contrast, the Center for Defense Information estimates that Israel has between 100 and 150 Jericho missiles, plus more than 200 F-4E Phantom and F-16 Falcon aircraft capable of delivering nuclear weapons. The United States has almost 1,500 nuclear delivery platforms, including Minuteman III and MX intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM's), Trident I and II submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBM's), B-52H Stratofortress and B-2 Spirit long-range bombers, and a variety of tactical nuclear bombs and cruise missiles.

Still, even sophisticated analysts think that, on balance, an Iranian nuclear weapon would have deleterious, if not catastrophic, consequences. The concern is that once Iran develops a nuclear capability, it would become even more aggressive in supporting ter-

rorist groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon or Hamas in Gaza. Another worry is that an Iranian bomb will set off a regional nuclear arms race. Finally, many Americans fear that once Iran fields a nuclear weapon, it will become even more meddlesome in Iraq. In other words, you don't have to think that an Iranian nuclear weapon is the end of the world to believe that it would be better for all concerned if Tehran never got one.

Any time the conventional wisdom is so one-sided, it makes sense to ask whether it is truly wise or simply an unreasoning article of faith. What has been missing from the debate is a consideration of the possible benefits of Iran crossing the nuclear threshold. No doubt even this suggestion will strike many as the height of academic muddle-headedness. But there are compelling theoretical and historical reasons to think that, far from being a crisis, Iranian membership in the nuclear club might be beneficial to everyone—even Israel.

The theoretical basis for this admittedly counterintuitive claim is political scientist Kenneth Waltz's famous Adelphi Paper, "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better." Waltz is not a marginal figure on the lunatic fringe, but rather ranks among the most influential international-relations theorists of the past 30 years. First published in 1981 by the prestigious International Institute for Strategic Studies in London—hardly a crackpot outfit—the paper argues that because nuclear weapons are only useful for deterrence of attacks upon their possessor's homeland, their proliferation, unlike that of other weapons that can be used for offensive operations, should reduce the frequency and intensity of wars. His central assumption is that rational states quickly realize this is the consequence of the nuclear revolution.

History has provided strong evidence that the development of nuclear weapons makes nuclear powers more careful, particularly in their relationships with each other. While there were many Cold War crises between the United States and the Soviet Union (and China), none escalated into major combat, much less all-out nuclear war. The same logic has apparently operated in the Indo-Pakistani relationship, the Kargil conflict of 1999 notwithstanding.

There is good evidence to suggest that the containment of these crises was the result of both sides stepping back from the brink of conflict for fear of unleashing a nuclear nightmare. Reflecting back on the Cuban Missile Crisis

Proponents of the first proposition suffer from historical amnesia. The first two nuclear adversaries the United States faced—Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's China—were hardly democratic regimes. Indeed, they rank among history's most totalitarian political systems. Yet neither of these totalitarian regimes risked nuclear war.

Both regimes engaged in mass murder of their own citizens. Conservative estimates of the human cost of Stalin's rule begin at 20 million deaths. Mao killed approximately the same number of his countrymen. Despite these sanguinary tendencies, neither regime was willing to risk nuclear war with the United States.

THERE ARE COMPELLING THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL REASONS TO THINK THAT, FAR FROM BEING A CRISIS, IRANIAN MEMBERSHIP IN THE NUCLEAR CLUB MIGHT BE BENEFICIAL—EVEN ISRAEL.

almost 30 years earlier, former secretary of defense Robert McNamara noted, "the lessons of the missile crisis are simple: Nuclear weapons are useful only for deterrence." Former Khrushchev aide Fyodor Burlatsky echoed this point, concluding, "it is impossible to win a nuclear war, and both sides realized that, maybe for the first time."

But for many participants in today's debate about the Iranian nuclear program, history is irrelevant because they think that the mullocracy in Iran is fundamentally different from the Cold War nuclear powers. They make two related arguments. First, Iran is an autocratic regime with little concern for the lives of its citizens, so it would not be deterred from nuclear war simply by the risk of suffering millions of casualties. Second, because Iran is a theocracy, it does not make rational strategic calculations, which are central to Waltz's theory.

Both also indulged in irresponsible nuclear rhetoric. Stalin publicly poohpoohed the American atomic bomb when told about it by President Truman at Potsdam in July 1945. Behind the scenes, however, he understood that atomic weapons represented a dramatic change in the nature of warfare and secretly began a crash program. The rhetoric of cavalier dismissal concealed a deep concern about nuclear weapons that, in turn, induced caution.

During his 1957 speech at the Moscow Meeting of Communist and Workers' Parties, Mao also dismissed the nuclear-armed United States as "a paper tiger" and remarked elsewhere that a nuclear war with the U.S. would not be such a catastrophe because "if worse came to worst and half of mankind died, the other half would remain while imperialism would be

razed to the ground and the whole world would become socialist.” But in private conversations with Field Marshal Sir Bernard Law Montgomery in September 1961, he argued that nuclear weapons “are not something to use. The more there are, the harder it will be for nuclear wars to break out.” This latter view apparently governed Chinese behavior.

IRAN IS A MUCH MORE COMPLEX POLITICAL SYSTEM THAN MOST WESTERN MEDIA ACCOUNTS SUGGEST, AND ITS PRESIDENT IS NOT THE MOST SIGNIFICANT POLITICAL ACTOR IN THAT COUNTRY.

The second objection to Waltz’s nuclear optimism is that Iran will not behave as a rational actor because it is an Islamic theocracy that values the afterlife more than the here and now. True, revolutionary Iran fought an eight-year war with Iraq and suffered almost a million casualties. But this is hardly evidence that its leadership and population have a martyrdom complex. It was, after all, secular Iraq, rather than Iran, that started the war, and the Islamic Republic was the first to accept the United Nations’ ceasefire in 1988 once it became clear that the conflict had reached a stalemate. This behavior hardly indicates an irrational commitment to fight to the last Iranian.

There is no doubt that the rhetoric of some Iranian leaders, particularly President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s florid threats that Israel will be “wiped off the map” and his ludicrous denials of the Holocaust, has been inflammatory and irresponsible. Yet we need to keep in mind that Iran is a much more complex political system than most Western media accounts suggest, and its president is not the most significant political actor in that country.

More importantly, when one looks

systematically at recent Iranian history, as Trita Parsi has done in his essential *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.*, two things become clear. Iranian behavior toward the United States and Israel has been remarkably consistent, both before and after the Islamic Revolution. That continuity is largely explained by a realpolitik not

so different from the logic that informed the policies of the Cold War superpowers.

At various times under both the Shah and the mullahs, Iran sought regional hegemony; at other times, under both regimes, it made overtures to the United States and even to Israel. Thus there is little reason to think that Iran would behave any differently than the Soviet Union or Communist China with nuclear weapons. If we could live with those rogue nuclear states, which were willing to sacrifice millions of their own people to advance an eschatological ideology, there is scant reason to think Iran poses a more serious threat.

One could go further and suggest that a nuclear Iran might even be beneficial to the United States. The nuclear stalemate played an important role in American efforts to contain the Soviet Union, and containment, in turn, had the effect of “mellowing” the regime, as George Kennan predicted in his famous *Foreign Affairs* article. Why should we not expect a regional stalemate involving the United States, Israel, and Iran to have a similar effect by simultaneously bolstering each nation’s territorial

security without providing any of them with the means of conquest against other states?

Arguing that an Iranian nuclear capability could benefit Israel is admittedly a more controversial claim. But in addition to the possible mellowing of the Iranian political system, which would be a long-term benefit for Israeli security, there could be some immediate payoffs, too. A nuclear Iran would certainly change the dynamics of the Persian Gulf, with many Arab states desperately searching for a nuclear ally to balance against Iran. Aside from the United States, Israel is the only counterweight in the region. A nuclear Iran could warm relations between Israel and moderate Arab states throughout the region who regard a powerful Iran—Islamic or not—as a threat.

I’m not arguing that an Iranian nuclear deterrent would have immediate transformative effects. It certainly would not, as more than 40 years of Cold War crises demonstrate. I also concede that the ideal situation would be a world without conflict in which nuclear weapons would be unnecessary. But we don’t live in that world. And so I am led to conclude, based upon our best theory of international relations and the perspective of Cold War history, that an Iranian nuclear deterrent would solve more problems than it creates. To paraphrase the subtitle of Stanley Kubrick’s great nuclear satire “Dr. Strangelove,” it might just be time to stop worrying and learn, if not to love, at least to tolerate the Iranian bomb. ■

Michael C. Desch is a professor of political science and fellow of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of Power and Military Effectiveness: The Fallacy of Democratic Triumphalism (2008).

What Is It Good For?

In the nuclear age, there can be no just war.

By **Stuart Reid**

A LONG TIME AGO, in a galaxy far, far away—actually, it was 1958, in the Royal County of Berkshire—I was staying with a friend from school one Sunday and, as a treat, his mother took us to Mass at the big American air base nearby. In those happy days, the guy in the guard hut did not pat you down with a metal detector before lifting the barrier. He didn't even ask for ID, as I recall, just leaned toward the driver's window, smiled, asked what our business was, and then let us through with a "Yes, ma'am" and a friendly salute.

The chapel was small, businesslike, perhaps rather austere. Above the altar was an electronic indicator board that would have started flashing THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING, or some such, if Soviet bombers had suddenly been detected heading our way. At the back of the chapel, close to the exit, were two airmen in combat gear—jump suits, maps strapped to knees, lots of zips, foil-wrapped Hershey bars stashed somewhere along with vitamins, Benzedrine, Russian phrase books, Swiss Army pen knives, compasses, possibly pistols, or, better still, revolvers...

"Introibo ad altare Dei," said the priest.

"Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam," said the server.

The two airmen followed the familiar, ancient liturgy, as they had done hundreds of times before. It was business as usual: kneel, stand, genuflect, bow, cross yourself, try not to let your mind wander or your eyes stray, and be ready to scramble if that freakin' sign begins to

flash. It would not for a moment have occurred to these two good young men that there was anything incongruous about being dressed to kill while worshipping the Prince of Peace, and to kill, furthermore, on a scale never hitherto imagined.

Nor, I doubt, would it have occurred to anyone else at Mass that morning. So far as we boys were concerned, everything was not only congruous but admirable and glamorous. This was the real deal. We were in America, if vicariously, among people who came from the same gene pool as Pat Boone and Montgomery Clift, Doris Day and Natalie Wood, Shelley Berman and Bob Newhart, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. To have been a teenager in England in the late 1950s was to have been an American. We were the products of cultural imperialism, and we loved it. No yoke was ever sweeter.

The Cold War was a motion picture or a giant game of chicken or both. The U.S. was James Dean in "Rebel Without a Cause." Russia the smirking boy with the comb between his teeth who chickens first but gets his sleeve stuck in the door handle and drives his car over the cliff. But there was more to this than glamour; it wasn't only make-believe. This was a world of certainty, of moral clarity. These airmen were defending us against atheistic communism and therefore against slave camps, mass murder, and nerdy clothes. To us the nuclear deterrent was cool, and it obviously worked because there had not been a world war for at least 13 years. I mean,

duh! (as we had not yet learnt to say). Only wimps and fellow travelers were against the deterrent.

Now we live in another galaxy. In the 50 years since I knelt with those airmen, the world has changed out of all recognition, and then some. The Cold War has ended, and Western values have triumphed. Films that would once have been restricted are now rated PG. There are rock concerts in Red Square. The Mass is in English. Phil Spector has been banged up for murder. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned.

Was it worth it? To a liberal capitalist, certainly; to a liberal democrat, perhaps; but surely not to a conservative. The Cold War itself increasingly looks like displacement therapy, or a military-industrial scam. Who now seriously believes that Washington would have risked millions of American lives in a war over Berlin? As for the nuclear deterrent, it's obviously time to join the peace activists. There will always be nukes, of course—you can't unsplit the atom—and while Russia and China have them, it is perhaps just as well that the United States should have them, too. Even so, their deployment signals that you are prepared to massacre civilians, and that is against the rules of war. It is barbaric. It is also stupid, since one of these devices could go off when you are not looking, especially if it were to find its way into the hands of an Islamist or a survivalist with a grudge.

Whatever else he may be, Barack Obama is not stupid, and he can see the downside of deterrent. The president