

## IRAN: DANGER AND OPPORTUNITY

Cassandra and Yogi Berra are an unlikely pair, but I hear both of their voices today. Cassandra, like some of us, was cursed to be always disbelieved as she correctly predicted the future while baseballer Yogi Berra will be remembered for his penetrating insight into the flow of history, "This is like *deja vu* all over again."

It is through the unlikely medium of *U.S. News and World Report* that Cassandra speaks. The March 12 issue gives us "6 signs the U.S. may be headed for war in Iran." The first tip the magazine highlights is the firing of Admiral William Fallon. While Fallon is hardly a "dove," he apparently – to judge by hints he gave in an interview with Thomas Barnett published in the March issue of *Esquire* – had argued that an attack on Iran made no military sense. If this really was his judgment, he obviously was not the man to be "CINC [Commander-in-chief] Centcom." That is, if the Bush administration really is intent on an attack.

Among other straws *U.S. News and World Report* found in the wind blowing out of Washington was the projected trip by Vice President Dick Cheney to what the magazine correctly described as a "logistics hub for military operations in the Persian Gulf," Oman, where the Strait of Hormuz constitutes "the vulnerable oil transit chokepoint into and out of the Persian Gulf that Iran threatens to blockade in the event of war."

Here is where Yogi Berra begins to come into the picture. As the *U.S. News and World Report* notes, "Back in March 2002, Cheney made a high-profile Mideast trip to Saudi Arabia and other nations that officials said at the time was about diplomacy toward Iraq and not war..." It was, as we now know, one of the concerted moves in the build-up to the already-decided-upon plan to attack Iraq. Is Cheney's 2008 trip "like *deja vu* all over again?" That certainly is the inference drawn by *U.S. News and World Report*.

Then, *U.S. News and World Report* introduces the Israeli card. It reports the widely held belief that the Israeli air attack on Syria, analyzed by Sy Hersh in one of his insightful pieces of investigative reporting on February 11, 2008 in *The New Yorker*, was *not* what it was proclaimed to be, an attack on a presumed nuclear site, but a means to force the Syrians to activate their anti-aircraft electronics – as America used to do with the Russians – to detect gaps along what might be a flight path from Israel toward Iran.

Why a flight path across Syria? Both because Turkey might not allow the use of its airspace and because using Jordan's airspace, as Israel did in its June 7, 1981 strike on the Iraqi nuclear facility at Osiriq, might seriously weaken the Jordanian regime which Israel would like to keep in place, at least for the time being.

Is a flight across Syria and Iraq to attack Iranian targets feasible? The

short answer is yes: the aircraft the United States has supplied to Israel have the range and presumably could be refueled on their return at a remote base among the 14 or so bases the U.S. has built and maintains in Iraq.

*U.S. News and World Report* also drew attention to the stationing of a guided missile destroyer off the Lebanese coast as another indication of preparations for war. The article does not explain why but points out that the destroyer has an anti-aircraft capability; so, the inference is that it would shoot down any Syrian aircraft attempting to hit Israel.

The article curiously passes over in silence the much more impressive build-up of naval power in the Persian Gulf. As of the last report I have seen, a major part of the U.S. Navy is deployed in and around the Persian Gulf. The numbers are stunning and include not only a vast array of weapons, including nuclear weapons, cruise and other missiles and hundreds of aircraft but also "insertion" (invasion) forces and equipment. Even then, these already deployed forces amount to only a fraction of the total that could be brought to bear on Iran because aircraft, both bombers and troop and equipment transports, stationed far away in Central Asia, the Indian Ocean, Europe and even in America can be quickly employed .

Of course, deploying forces along Iran's frontier does not necessarily mean using them. At least that is what the Administration says. However, as a historian and former participant in government, I believe that having troops and weapons on the spot makes their use more likely than not. Why is that?

It is because a massive build-up of forces inevitably creates the "climate" of war. Troops and the public, on both sides, come to accept its inevitability. Standing down is difficult and can entail loss of "face." Consequently, political leaders usually are carried forward by the flow of events. Having taken steps 1, 2 and 3, they find taking step number 4 logical, even necessary. In short, momentum rather than policy begins to control action. As Barbara Tuchman showed in her study of the origins of the First World War, *The Guns of August*, even though none of the parties really wanted to go to war, none could stop the process. It was the fact that President Kennedy had been reading Tuchman's book just before the Cuban Missile Crisis, I believe, that made him so intent on not being "hijacked by events." His restraint was unusual. More common is a surrender to "sequence" as was shown by the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It would have taken a major reversal of policy – and considerable political bravery -- to halt either invasion once the massive build-up was in place. No such effort was made then. Will it be now? I think the odds are against it.

In fact, moves are being made, decisions are being taken and rationale has been set out that point in the opposite direction. Consider just a few of these in

addition to what *U.S. News and World Report* highlighted:

- the strategic rationale for preëemptive military action was set forth in the 2005 *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*. It proclaimed that “America is a nation at war...[and] will defeat adversaries at the time, place, and in the manner of our choosing...[rather than employing] A reactive or defensive approach...Therefore, we must confront challenges earlier and more comprehensively, before they are allowed to mature...In all cases, we will seek to seize the initiative and dictate the tempo, timing, and direction of military operations.” In short, as Henry Kissinger pointed out in *The International Herald Tribune*, April 14, 2006, it is an assertion of the intention to engage in preëemptive or “first strike” warfare. So, the process that began in Afghanistan and was then carried to Iraq and (on a smaller scale) to Somalia points toward action against Iran.
- Why Iran? Iran is not the only target. American “Special Ops” forces are engaged in a number of countries, at last count about twenty. A “training” force (an echo of Vietnam) is being deployed in Pakistan to help fight the Pathan hosts of the Taliban and Usama bin Ladin along the frontier with Afghanistan and another is in India to help the action against the Naxalite insurgents, but Iran is the major target.
- Among the reasons that the Bush administration has proclaimed are that Iran is supporting terrorism by supplying arms, training and encouragement both to anti-American insurgents in Iraq and to anti-Israeli Hizbullah militants in Lebanon and that it is moving toward the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Doubts have been expressed on both of these contentions. Iran played a positive role in against the Taliban (and against the drug trade) in Afghanistan and evidence on Iraq is, at best, sketchy. On the nuclear issue, a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) reported in November 2007 the consensus of all the American intelligence agencies “with high confidence” that Iran is not actively seeking to develop nuclear weapons.
- Additionally, there is a psychological or political motivation. President Bush proclaimed on January 29, 2002 that Iran was part of the “Axis of Evil.” He and others have conjured the memory of the seizure of the American embassy and taking of our officers hostage and have condemned the lamentable Iranian government record on civil liberties and particularly on the treatment of women. With Iraq under occupation and presumably incapable of mounting a credible threat outside its own territory and with North Korea immune to attack (as it already has nuclear weapons), Iran is the major perceived adversary capable of doing what *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*

termed “adopting threatening capabilities, methods, and ambitions...[to] 1) limit our global freedom to act, 2) dominate key regions, or 3) attempt to make prohibitive the costs of meeting various U.S. international commitments.”

Decoded and applied to Iran, the *Strategy* paper defines Iranian actions as disrupting American objectives in the Middle East and has the potential to dominate what is believed to be the largest still-only-partially-developed pool of oil and gas in the world.

Thus, as defined by the *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, Iran is an obvious target.

Apparently, President Bush’s firing of Admiral Fallon was meant to signal to the Iranians that “all options remain on the table.” This is the publically proclaimed policy of the Bush administration and has also been adopted by the Democratic Party aspirants to the White House, notably even by Barack Obama who recently said, “all options, and I mean all options, are on the table.”

Leaving aside the issue of international law – which defines the conditions under which military action is defense (and so is legal) rather than aggression (and so is illegal) and which, having been adopted by the United States government, is American law also -- is a preëemptive military strike against Iran feasible? Allegedly, Admiral Fallon did not think so. I certainly do not either. The reasons are both evident and unambiguous. They include the following:

- However they may feel about their government, Iranians are a proud and nationalistic people who have suffered for generations from meddling, espionage and invasions by the Russians, the British and the Americans. They are even less likely than the Cubans (as the organizer of the CIA Bay of Pigs task force, Richard Bissell, predicted) or the Iraqis (as the Neoconservatives fantasized in 2003) to welcome foreign intrusion. If attacked, they undoubtedly would fight.
- While the United States could almost certainly quickly destroy the Iranian regular army, as it did the Iraqi regular army, the Iranians are better prepared for a guerrilla war than were the Iraqis. They have in being a force of at least 150 thousand dedicated and appropriately armed members of the *Pasdaran-i Inqilab* (Revolutionary National Guard) on land and at sea a numerous assortment of small, maneuverable and lethal speedboats stationed all along the Persian Gulf coast. Use of the boats would probably be suicidal but it would be a miracle if they failed to inflict heavy casualties among the American fleet. They almost certainly could interdict oil tankers.

- War is always unpredictable – except that it is always worse than expected. No one thought that the First World War would last more than a few months. The cost is also always unestimated. Before the American invasion of Iraq, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld thought it would cost only about \$50 billion; his deputy (and later president of the world bank) Paul Wolfowitz thought it would cost nothing because the Iraqis would pay for it; and when Larry Lindsay, the White House economic adviser, predicted it might cost \$200 billion, President Bush fired him. Estimates now run between \$2 and \$6 trillion. To shield this reality from the public, the Bush administration resorted to massive borrowing abroad – U.S. Treasury obligations amounted to \$2.7 trillion as of early this year and are now higher – and to a massive increase -- up 70% during this Administration -- in national debt.

Almost no casualties were expected in Iraq; now American dead number about 4,000 and a realistic figure for various categories of “wounded” – officially put at about 20,000 – actually runs in the hundreds of thousands. Just coping with the American wounded is expected to cost half a trillion dollars.

But, Iraq is a small country while Iran is large, diverse and populated by about three times as many people as Iraq. The costs, human, material and monetary would certainly be a multiple of those suffered in Iraq. It is not unlikely that war with Iran would effectively “break” the American volunteer army and bankrupt America.

- Given this unattractive scenario, military planners have reportedly emphasized their intent to use mainly or even solely “surgical” air strikes. But the fact that CENTCOM has positioned ships to “insert” troops may be taken as a tacit admission by military planners that air strikes alone would be unable to destroy either Iran’s nuclear facilities (which are believed to be widely scattered, often located in heavily populated urban areas and/or in protected underground locations) or to crush the nation’s will to resist. Almost certainly, military commanders would demand permission to follow up air strikes with some form of “boots on the ground.” Presumably and at least initially these would likely be Special Forces, but, inevitably (I would assert from my observation and study of past military adventures) some of these forces, even if intended only for limited action and quick withdrawal, will get caught and have to be rescued. Thus, what is planned and begun as restricted action is extremely unlikely to be containable.
- Military action is also likely to result in various military, paramilitary and economic and other responses by Iranians and others outside of the

immediate theater of combat. Consider the following:

1. The Iraqi government, although installed by the United States, is predominantly culturally and religiously allied to Iran; in the shock of an American invasion of Iran, it would almost certainly collapse or intensify the struggle against American personnel in Iraq. Guerrilla forces of Muqtada as-Sadr's "Mahdi Army," now observing a ceasefire, would turn on the Americans;
2. What the Hizbullah forces in Lebanon could do other than firing rockets is, to me at least, unclear, but a renewed round of savage fighting with Israel would appear likely;
3. Those Middle Eastern governments allied with or thought to be subservient to the United States (Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt) might either be overthrown by their own military, have to fight civil wars or, at least would become even more unpopular;
4. Elsewhere, Muslims of all sects would probably almost universally turn against the United States so that much of Asia and Africa would be convulsed and Americans and American interests would suffer; but
5. It is the economic consequences of an invasion that are, perhaps, the most predictable and the most damaging to America. Iran produces about 8% of the world's flow of energy and roughly 40% of the world's energy is conveyed by tanker down the Persian Gulf. Iran's own production – and possibly much of the Saudi production which is worked by Saudis of Shia persuasion – would be drastically curtailed or even halted, and as a result of naval action tankers are likely to be laid up or sunk in the Gulf. With oil already at over \$105/bbl, the price is likely to soar with the predictable result of a major world economic catastrophe. Just for the United States, every \$1 rise in the price of oil diminishes the national income by some \$3 billion.

Such might be the results of a decision to attack Iran. But, what if the current actions and pronouncements are just threats, intended only to frighten the Iranians into doing what the United States wants?

- First, to be effective, threats must be credible. I imagine that the Iranians must view our threats in something like the scale I have just set out. If they have, I imagine that they will have concluded that the United States government would have to be mad to attack Iran when the costs of doing so are so evident and so large. In short, they probably would have reached the same conclusion

Admiral Fallon is said to have reached.

- Second, it does not seem clear to me what the Iranians could do, even if they wished to do so, to satisfy the United States' demands unless Iran were occupied. Absent a large and intrusive American presence, how could an Iranian government prove that it does not have or at least seek nuclear weapons? Proving a negative has always been logically impossible and any attempt to do so would certainly be politically unsatisfactory to America and probably politically impossible for Iran. This, we should remember, is roughly the situation we (and the IAEA) reached in Iraq.
- Third, having received a credible threat to destroy their country, the Iranians almost certainly would seek as rapidly as secretly possible to acquire the only sure means to deter such an attack, possession of a nuclear weapon. This also was the conclusion that Mohamed ElBaradei of the IAEA reached. (Interview in the Argentinian newspaper *Clarín* on November 29, 2007) Thus, a policy of threat that falls short of actual attack must result in a long-term defeat even if seemingly producing a short-term victory for the United States.

Since we must assume that both the Iranian and American governments will realize the logic of these points, I think we must conclude that a policy of threat would slide almost inevitably into conflict.

Moreover, war does not occur only by design. During the long years of the Cold War, many of us worried over the danger of accidental war. Dozens of incidents illustrated the danger – and at least some were avoided more by luck than by cleverness. One in which I was involved was averted during the Cuban Missile Crisis. As careful as we on the Crisis Management Committee then were, we could see that an unpredictable and even a rather trivial event could happen and could have disastrous consequences. One I luckily caught was this: one of our destroyers was positioned above a Soviet submarine, intent on embarrassing it when the submarine surfaced. When I received notice of the situation, my mind went back to the June 28, 1914 assassination of Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand at Sarajevo. I could imagine a sailor throwing a bottle and his counterpart firing a pistol. Accidents happen despite all attempts at control: most are immediately contained as was the submarine incident in the Missile Crisis, but luck cannot be guaranteed. War is a weapon with many triggers.

Of course, we must factor into our estimates the fact that some Americans, notably the Neoconservatives who have set much of the policy of the Bush administration, have actively espoused a war policy. (See, for example, Norman

Podhoretz's article "Stopping Iran: Why the Case for Military Action Still Stands," February *Commentary*.) Their position has been encouraged and echoed by the current Israeli government. Less known is the fact that the American and Israeli "hawks" have their counterparts in the Iranian government, as the former Iranian ambassador to the United Nations admitted to me privately. Consider their positions:

- The Neoconservatives began almost twenty years ago to advocate what has come to be called "the long war," in the vortex of which the world would be recast. One of them, the former CIA Director James Woolsey, tried to be optimistic, saying he hoped this world-wide and cataclysmic conflict would not last more than 40 years.
- Religious fundamentalists – Christians, Jews, Muslims and Hindus – share an eschatological vision. Indeed, I think it is fair to say that each faith includes groups who actually *yearn* for apocalypse during which time the world is destroyed to be reborn as a messiah or *mahdi* appears. To the "true believers," hurrying toward the end of the world is a race not toward horror but a fulfilling spiritual experience in which it is only the enemies of the true faith who will suffer (as St. John so graphically portrays in *The Revelation*). In their version of messianism, the Shiis believe that the righteous will be delivered from the tyranny of the corrupt, the Shiis believe, and the earth will be filled with justice and happiness.

Thus, one need not fear but actually should embrace actions that lead toward "the end." We know this eschatology is the mind-set of Christian fundamentalists; less well known is that it is also the mind-set of Shia fundamentalists. What we think of as fatalism, is not just acceptance of destiny but often is proactive. This may shape at least some Iranian attitudes toward the terrible destruction that would come from an American attack. My impression is that the Iranian Shia fundamentalists, presumably including their *mujdtahid* leadership, believe that the ensuing war would hasten the way toward the Last Day when the Twelfth Imam, The Mahdi, would reappear to cleanse the world of evil.

- If the *mujdtahid* leadership, which is obviously deeply religious and obviously incorporates the central dogma of Shiism, holds these views then a policy of threat or even of brutal military action will produce effects different from those we thought shaped the attitude of the Russian leadership during the Cold War. Then, we shared with the Russians a salutary vision of horror -- as set out, for example, in Cormac McCarthy's recent novel, *The Road*. The absolute need to avoid war was the ultimate brake on us because we knew that if we

really went to war millions, perhaps hundreds of millions, of people would be made refugees, wounded or incinerated. But, if one really believes in the Last Day, then this brake is loosened. Thus, I think we should factor into our calculations on American policy toward Iran, a reaction very different from that we expected from the Russians.

- Moreover, even among secular Iranians (and others), I detect a belief that while America would win battles it would lose the war, that over time, Western society, seen as corrupt, materialistic and selfish, would give way, exhaust itself or retreat to its home ground while those who have no place to which to retreat are kept “pure” by their very poverty and are inspired by their faith or nationalism cannot and will not surrender.
- Thus, even short of a nuclear Armageddon, the “Long War” advocated by the Neoconservatives would spread misery, violence, starvation, disease and death. The “fabric” that holds societies together would be shredded so that a chaos even Hobbes could not have imagined would become common over much of the world. The worst affected would be the poor nations but even rich societies would be corrupted and crippled. Reacting over a generation or more to fear of terrorism and the emotional “blow-back” of war, they would lose faith in law, civil liberties, indeed civil society in general. Strong men would come to the fore proclaiming that survival justifies giving up the civic, cultural and material good life. Step by step along the path of the long war, we could fall into the nightmare George Orwell laid out in his novel *1984*.

If this is even a remote and unlikely danger, and I believe it is far more than that, we would be foolish indeed not to try to find means to avoid taking any steps – of which war with Iran would be not a step but a leap -- toward it. So what might those means be? I begin with the nuclear issue:

Since obviously means should be tailored to the issue to be solved, we must begin by asking why Iran would want nuclear weapons.

- If I were an Iranian, I would point to President Bush’s formulation of the “Axis of Evil.” I would note that Iraq did not have nuclear weapons and was virtually destroyed while North Korea which had them and was left in peace. Having a nuclear weapon is the surest form of defense in our dangerous world. There are, of course, other reasons for becoming a nuclear power – access to advanced technology, national prestige, cheap power, etc. – but the bottom line is national defense.
- It follows that threats must encourage the Iranian leadership to acquire a nuclear capacity. If I were an Iranian, that is what I would certainly

advocate. And, if America attacks Iran, even if it manages to completely destroy all the production facilities and kill all the technicians, as an Iranian I would do all in my power to beg, borrow or steal a bomb. We can be sure that that would be the aim of any future Iranian government. It was, after all, also the aim of the government of the Shah, and had he lived a few more years the current Iranian government would have inherited nuclear weapons. So, threats and certainly any military action can only be ultimately self-defeating even if temporarily successful.

The second question we should address is what is the consequence of Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon and what we should do about it. There are, I suggest, four interlocking answers:

- First, from personal experience during the Cuban Missile Crisis and from my study, I firmly believe that the existence of nuclear weapons *anywhere* constitutes a danger to people *everywhere*. Thus, we should do all we can to get all nations to phase them out with all deliberate speed. For the first half century of the nuclear age, as McGeorge Bundy describes it in *Danger and Survival*, we have been both prudent and lucky, but we have little reason to think we can count on either as former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara argues in "Apocalypse Soon" (*Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2005).
- Second, if Iran acquires a nuclear weapon, it will not be able to use it or threaten to use it aggressively for fear of an almost certain attack. This has been true of all the nuclear powers -- the US, the Soviet Union, China, India, Pakistan, Britain, France, North Korea and Israel. While dangerous and costly, Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) has worked. Ironically, this ultimate weapon is employable only as a deterrent. Therefore, I think that the near hysteria evoked by the nuclear issue as applied to Iran is overblown or as put forward by some even meretricious. But,
- Third, if Iran does acquire a weapon, it is likely that other countries in the area would follow its (and Israel's) lead and move toward acquisition. These might include Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the richer of the Gulf states and conceivably even Syria. Today, acquisition is largely a matter of allocation of resources and in changed circumstances might be achieved without having to actually make them.
- Fourth, it seems to me that this, I judge predictable, course of events offers us a rare opportunity to move toward nuclear sanity. We must not forget that crises are also times of opportunity. This could be so crucial to our life on this planet that I will dilate on it:

1. The reason why states acquire nuclear weapons (as distinct from why they seek to acquire nuclear technology) is fear of attack. The Soviet Union did because of fear of us, China did largely out of fear of the USSR, India and Pakistan did out of fear of one another, Israel did in fear of the Arabs. However, as more and more states acquire weapons, parity or balance is replaced by growing unpredictability. Arguably, Israel, for example, gained security when it alone in the Middle East had the bomb. But if, as I believe is inevitable, other states acquire them, its security will be diminished and its danger increased. Therefore, arguably, since it already has the strongest army and air force in the area, it would be to Israel's interest to create a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East. It is probably not possible to force the Israelis into such a policy, if it is directly solely at them, but overall considerations I have mentioned argue that the United States should revert to the policy we espoused in the 1960s which foresaw the elimination of nuclear weapons worldwide. The Iranian crisis could thus be a catalyst in a move toward a safer world.
2. Since threat or attack would lead to disaster, and since it is to the fundamental interest of the United States to move toward peace, a part of the solution to the Iranian "crisis" should involve the revocation of the 2005 *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* which causes other nations to fear us and which is more likely to embroil us in wars than to enhance our national security. Highlighting this issue, the Iranian crisis thus gives us an opportunity to readjust our goals and our means of action.
3. Included in our means of action is an awesome military force, which we have painfully learned does not always and necessarily enhance our security and well-being but can, itself, be a cause of danger and impoverishment. This is the lesson of history: great powers seldom fail on the battlefield but often lose sway by exhaustion or hubris. Our military machine is grossly out of proportion both to our needs and to what the world will peacefully tolerate. And some pieces of it, particularly the legacy of Secretary Rumsfeld, the "Special Operations Command," are a clear and present danger to us. As we recognize the dangers inherent in the Iranian crisis, we can use the opportunity for a clear-headed reevaluation of our *real* security needs and best means to achieve them.

4. Involved also in the Iranian crisis is our conception of the world order. As a piece of the settlement of the Iranian crisis, both we and the Iranians have a chance to come to grips with reality: we cannot remake other cultures and should not try to do so. The harder we press, the more ugly the process becomes both for us and for them. Specifically in Iran, our threats bring out the worst in the ruling group. Once the pressure is removed, Iranians will have the breathing room to reaffirm their obvious desires for "the good life." Then a more humane order will have a chance. That is the course of events we have seen, for example, in Vietnam.
5. Also coming out of this crisis we have seen that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has made a major contribution to our security and well-being. It has served our purposes not by being our rubber stamp but by being professional and independent. We should learn from this experience. But, American administration after administration has purposefully made the United Nations weak and has deliberately picked weak men to lead it. We would be well advised to use the process of solving the Iran crisis to reconsider how it and other international institutions, such as the world court, could enhance our national interest.

In conclusion, I believe that we are at one of those rare points in history when great nations find themselves, as Shakespeare put it so memorably at the changing of the tide:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,  
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life  
Is bound in shallows and in miseries,  
On such a full sea are we now afloat,  
And we must take the current when it serves,  
Or lose our ventures.

I hope and trust we will use the tide of the Iranian "crisis" to lead on to fortune rather than getting bound in shallows and miseries.

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