

## Wake Up! The Next War Is Coming

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An understated headline moved me yesterday; it was atop AP's explosively formed story about the "explosively formed penetrators" traced to Iran that are killing our troops in Iraq: "Democrats Skeptical of Starting Row With Iran." Yawn.

Webster's: "row"—"a noisy disturbance or quarrel." Yawn.

What about starting another unwinnable war—this time with Iran? If you are a member of Congress, does it suffice to be "skeptical" about that? Hello?

On January 19, Senator Jay Rockefeller, D-W. Va., chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, told *The New York Times* he believes the White House is developing a case for taking action against Iran, even though U.S. intelligence is not well informed about politics in Iran. "To be quite honest, I'm concerned that it's Iraq again," said Rockefeller. "This whole concept of moving against Iran is bizarre."

Ten days later he told Wolf Blitzer, "I have a great deal of worry that this [escalation of the war in Iraq] could expand...into some kind of action with respect to Iran, which I think would be an enormous mistake."

Then why not stop it, Senator Rockefeller? Stop the war against Iran before it starts. You are chair of the intelligence committee. You don't have to be stonewalled, as previous chair Senator Bob Graham was in September 2002. Yes, he voted against the war in Iraq because he knew of the games being played with the intelligence. But he failed to play a leadership role; he didn't tell his 99 colleagues they were being diddled. It's time for some leadership.

Several of your colleague senators were reeking of red herring when they arrived home from yesterday's talk shows. Many of them allowed the administration to divert attention from the main issue with Iran—its nuclear development plans. Instead, the focus was on explosive technology Iran is reported to be giving to Shiite elements to blow up U.S. vehicles on the roads of Iraq. This transport problem is compounded by the unfriendly skies there, where a handful of U.S. helicopters have been shot down in recent weeks. So the problem with "explosively formed penetrators" in improvised explosive devices (IEDs) at roadside is real enough.

Why not take the Army's PowerPoint show-and-tell to Tehran, confront the Iranian leaders and demand they stop? Sorry, I forgot: we don't talk with bad people. Well, we might try it, just this once.

The real fly in the ointment—the real aim of the U.S. military buildup in the Persian Gulf and

of threatening gestures elsewhere—has to do with Iran’s nuclear plans. Recent revelations that the Bush administration summarily rejected Iranian overtures in 2003 to include this neuralgic topic among others in a broad bilateral discussion strengthens the impression that President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney actually prefer the military option to destroy Iranian nuclear-related facilities. In any case, the recent hype and provocative actions are likely to end up with an attack on Iran, unless Congress moves quickly to head it off.

### **Show Me the Intelligence**

Where is the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on prospects for Iran’s nuclear capability? You, Senator Rockefeller now have the power to ensure that such estimates are done regularly and in a timely way. An estimate is said to be under way, but at a seemingly leisurely pace completely inappropriate to the circumstances. And there has been no NIE on this key issue since spring 2005.

As you know, the Bush/Cheney administration is no fan of NIEs, unless they can get the likes of former Pentagon functionary Douglas Feith and former CIA director George Tenet to fix the estimate to the policy—as the recent Defense Department Inspector General report’s proved.

In any case, the 2005 NIE concluded that Iran would not be able to produce enough highly enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon until “early to mid-next decade,” with general consensus that 2015 would probably be the earliest. Interestingly, since 1995, U.S. intelligence officials continually estimated Iran to be “within five years” of the capability to make nuclear weapons.

The new NIE in 2005, though, was the first key estimate managed by widely respected Thomas Fingar, the State Department officer who took leadership of the National Intelligence Council earlier that year. Its key judgments were not welcome downtown, however, since they were issued at a time when Vice President Dick Cheney was warning of a “fairly robust new nuclear program,” in Iran, and was painting the threat—and particularly the danger to Israel—as far more imminent.

Several patriotic truth tellers (aka leakers) told *The Washington Post* of the NIE’s main judgments. The exposure of the intelligence judgments came amid credible reports that the vice president had ordered up contingency plans for a large-scale air assault on Iran, that included tactical nuclear weapons to take out hardened underground nuclear facilities.

The 2005 estimate noted indications that Iran was conducting clandestine work, but there was no information linking those projects directly to a nuclear weapons program. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) still has found no conclusive evidence that Iran is trying to build nuclear weapons. (Does that bring back painful memories of Iraq four years ago?) But unlike Iraq, which had been frightened into awarding full cooperation with U.N. inspectors in early 2003, Iran was far less than candid in responding to IAEA questions, and the agency has suspended some aid to Iran and criticized it for concealing certain nuclear-related activities.

The ambiguities are such that, if we bombed Iran, we would once again be going to war in the subjunctive mood.

The dearth of hard evidence shines through some of the more disingenuous pleading of senior administration officials—Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, in particular, who have argued that with all the oil at Iran’s disposal it does not need nuclear energy. The trouble is that when Cheney was President Gerald Ford’s chief of staff, he and then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld persuaded Ford to give the Shah a nuclear program to meet its future energy requirements. There is even more credibility to that claim now. Energy experts note that oil extraction in Iran is already near peak and that the country will need alternatives to oil in the coming decades.

In 1976, Ford reluctantly signed a directive offering Iran a deal that would have brought at least \$5.4 billion for U.S. corporations like Westinghouse and General Electric, had not the Shah been unceremoniously ousted three years later. The offer included a reprocessing facility for a complete nuclear-fuels cycle—essentially the same capability that the United States, Israel and other countries now insist Iran cannot be allowed to acquire. This is, of course, no secret to Khomeini’s successors.

### **What Can Be Said**

What Iran is seeking is an enrichment capability, and that capability would allow it eventually to produce nuclear weapons. Whether the Iranians intend to use that technology in the near term for that purpose is open to debate. But if they can develop a commercial/civilian enrichment capability, they will have what Israel calls the “nuclear option.” What cannot be honestly said at this point is what Nicholas Burns, number three in the State Department, has been saying: “There is no doubt Iran is seeking nuclear weapons.” You would think they would take care not to use the exact same phrases they used just four years ago making spurious charges regarding “Iraq’s nuclear program.”

One can argue, as French President Jacques Chirac did in a recent moment of candor, that Iran’s possession of a nuclear weapon would not be “very dangerous,” because Iran is well aware that if it fired it at Israel, Tehran would be immediately “razed.” And the post-WWII experience saw mutual deterrence work for 45 years. But the suggestion that the Israeli government try to relax into the concept of deterrence in view of the formidable nuclear arsenal Israel already has, tends to fall on deaf ears. And, given memories of the Holocaust and the ranting of Iran’s current president, this is in some degree understandable.

But there is an equally compelling reason to dissuade Iran from going nuclear. And that is the nuclear proliferation to which that would inevitably lead in the Middle East. The U.S. needs to engage in direct talks with Tehran; we do have common interests and concerns, and we could work toward devising ways to alleviate Israeli fears. But, given the testosterone and myopia that color the Bush administration’s behavior in that region, appeals to those realities and approaches seem to fall on deaf ears.

### **Congress Must Act**

Please, Senator Rockefeller, the National Intelligence Estimate on Iran’s nuclear situation is said to be targeted for completion in March. That’s too late; you need to read it before the bombs and missiles start falling on Iran.

An attack on Iran would bring catastrophe. Americans would want to know our reasons for doing so. “Explosively formed penetrators” are unlikely to persuade. Nor will a nuclear threat to the U.S. 10 years hence be found convincing. Iran poses no immediate threat to

America. It is right that we be concerned about the security of Israel, but the burden of proof should be on those who argue that deterrence cannot work in that situation.

Most important, bilateral talks with Iran are a *sine qua non*. Given the circumstances, including heightened tensions and the danger of miscalculation, avoiding face-to-face encounters makes little sense.

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