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THEY SAID IT

The mullahs have torn off their conciliatory mask in order to bare their fangs to us, the Europeans, and the Iranian people. If we had an Iran strategy worthy of the name, our confused leaders would have pointed out the remarkable interview with the chief nuclear affairs negotiator, Hossein Musavian. It was broadcast on Iranian television August 4th, and made it quite clear that the Iranians deliberately tricked the Europeans into giving the mullahs an extra year to complete a vital part of their nuclear program in Isfahan.

"Thanks to the negotiations with Europe," he bragged, "we gained another year, in which we completed . . . Isfahan." This was quite a coup, at least in Musavian's humble opinion: "We suspended (the enrichment program) in Isfahan in October 2004, although we were required to do so in October 2003 . . . Today we are in a position of power: (the program) in Isfahan is complete and UF4 and UF6 gases are being produced. We have a stockpile of products, and . . . we have managed to convert 36 tons of yellow cake into gas and store it . . ."

President Chirac? Chancellor Schroeder? Prime Minister Blair? How do you all intend to answer your parliamentary inquiries? You were all gulled by the mullahs (or, to put the darkest light on the matter, willing accomplices).

Meanwhile, the mullahs are killing us.

--Michael Ledeen, "Iran the Model," *National Review Online*, August 19, 2005

BUT I DIDNT KNOW UNTIL THIS DAY THAT IT WAS KHOMEINI ALL ALONG.

The four-year anniversary of the September 11 attacks occasioned a significant number of articles on the subject of the on-going war on terror. Naturally, the analysis offered in these pieces varied greatly in both quality and perspective. Some were excellent; most were not. Some noted the progress President Bush has made; others focused on the failures and the missed opportunities. But despite their differences, the overwhelming majority shared one critical element. They all dated the beginning of the war on terror to that fateful day four years ago when 19 Sunni Muslims, at the direction of Osama bin Laden, hijacked four airplanes and used them as weapons to attack the United States.

While I certainly wouldn't quibble about the assertion that 9/11 changed American perspectives on the problems associated with radical Islamism and took the conflict between Islamism and the West to a much higher level, the focus on the last four years is, I believe, a little shortsighted and therefore threatens to obscure the greater threat.

The fact of the matter is that Islamism's war against America has been going on for over 25 years now, beginning long before al Qaeda was formed in the vast wasteland of the Afghan mountains. And the United States will never adequately address the threat unless and until it recognizes this, along with the important fact that most the important instigator of this war is the Islamic Republic of Iran.

I have never had much use for the notion that the war in Iraq is problematic because it is a distraction from the "real" war against terrorism and has diverted resources from what should be the principal battlefield in that war, i.e., the capture of Osama bin Laden. I have always viewed this as little more than a feeble attempt to disparage the effort in Iraq while maintaining the pretense of being dedicated to the national security concerns posed by terrorism.

That said, I have long believed that one of the key concerns about the Iraqi front in the war on terror is that it is something of a distraction, not from the pursuit of a handful of holdouts in the Afghani mountains, but from the fact that Iran is the largest and most prolific state sponsor of terrorism in the world and has been for twenty-five years; that Iran is the principal safe-harbor for al Qaeda operatives and leaders on the run from American forces in Afghanistan and Iraq; that Iran is nearing the point where it can produce nuclear weapons and use them against American troops overtly or against American civilians covertly; and that Iran envisions itself as the regional hegemon, the leader of global Islam, and the new global counter to American power.

Three years ago, shortly before the invasion of Iraq, I wrote an article arguing that if the Bush administration truly wanted to change the dynamic in the Middle East, it should start with the Mad Mullahs

in Tehran and work its way back toward Baghdad and Riyadh from there. Hindsight, of course, is twenty-twenty, and there is little point in questioning decisions that have already been made. Saddam was a threat, and that threat has been removed. Iraq is poised to become the Muslim world's first true democracy and, as such, may well meet the Bush administration's expectations and serve as an inspiration for democratic reform throughout the region. The "insurgency" in Iraq seeks to prevent the onset of this transformation and thus has become a critical threat to American interests and must be thoroughly defeated.

But all of that notwithstanding, the expenditures of effort and concentration necessary to subdue Iraq has left Iran to its own devices, even as it has played a major role in funding and populating the aforementioned Iraqi insurgency. And this, in turn, has meant that many of the fears about "distraction" appear to have been allowed to come to fruition.

Now, it's not that I believe that President Bush intentionally ignored Iran or has been caught off guard by the Islamic Republic's continued belligerence. It's just that political realities, both in Iraq and in the United States, have necessitated putting Iran on the proverbial back burner. The terrorist insurgency in Iraq is proving shockingly resilient. And the opposition at home is proving to be as significant if not more significant an obstacle to the achievement of the administration's war aims than even the insurgency. While left-wing critics bleat about the "occupation," the failure of democratization, and the need to concede defeat and bring the boys home, even some on the right appear swayed by public opinion polls and have themselves begun to wonder aloud if acceptance of defeat might not be the most prudent course of action. The American people appear to be losing their taste for the battle already met and it would be difficult to imagine that their lagging spirits would be lifted by engagement on another front.

And all the while, the Iranians are pressing their advantage. Three weeks ago, Iranian-born author Amir Taheri detailed the aggressive stances being taken by the Islamic Republic in light of United States' preoccupation with Iraq. He wrote:

Iran is grossly misunderstood in the West. Given headlines in Europe and America, you would think that the crisis in relations is about nuclear weapons. But the real cause is far broader: Iran's determination to reshape the Middle East in its own image—a deliberate “clash of civilizations” with the United States....

The bad news is that, if anything, he [newly installed Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad] can be expected to be a far more formidable enemy of the West—and of America in particular. A month ago General Safavi declared before an audience of senior naval officers that Tehran's mission was to create “a multipolar world in which —Iran plays a leadership role” for Islam. Recently, Ahmadinejad announced one of the most ambitious government mission statements in decades, declaring that the ultimate goal of Iran's foreign policy is nothing less than “a government for the whole world” under the leadership of the Mahdi, the Absent Imam of the Shiites—code for the export of radical Islam. As for the only power capable of challenging this vision, the United States is in its “last throes,” an ofuli (sunset) power destined to be superceded by the toluce (sunrise) of the Islamic republic. Geopolitical dominance in the Middle East, the tract unequivocally stated, is “the incontestable right of the Iranian nation.”

Westerners might be tempted to dismiss this as rhetorical saber rattling. It is not.

This weekend, at the gathering of the globe's grand Pooh-Bahs at Turtle Bay, Ahmadinejad took his nation's aggression one step further, openly calling the West's bluff with regard to Iran's nuclear “energy” program, believing that there is nothing that anyone can do to stop the Islamic Republic from the developing the second and vastly more threatening Islamic Bomb. Calling attempts to portray his country's nuclear ambitions as threatening a “propaganda ploy,” Ahmadinejad declared that Iran had the right to develop nuclear capabilities and to continue to “enrich” (i.e. weaponize) the spent

fuel. Ahmadinejad's speech, which was described in press accounts as “fiery,” was so confrontational that it forced even the French to concede that the very credibility of the International Atomic Energy Agency rests on referring Iran to the Security Council to address “concerns raised by [Iran's] nuclear program” and to impose sanctions.

It is highly unlikely that the Security Council will impose such sanctions, given that two of its members, Russia and oil-hungry China, are disinclined either to aid the American cause or to hinder that of the Iranians. But even if sanctions were imposed, it is highly unlikely that Iran would be bowed. Though the Islamic Republic has not been as aggressive in its denunciations of sanctions as has the other nuclear rogue regime, North Korea, the Iranians have more than intimated that such a development would be considered a hostile move. And it appears that they are ready in the eventuality that such “hostilities” commence. Again, according to Amir Taheri:

Since [June], the revolutionary factions have conducted a little-publicized purge of the military, the security apparatus, the civil service and state-owned corporations and media.

Among those replaced: the defense minister, the commander-in-chief of the regular army and his four deputies, 11 senior commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and five commanders of the paramilitary Mobilization of the Dispossessed — plus the intelligence and security minister and the interior minister (who controls the police and the gendarmerie). Also noteworthy is the appointment of military officers to posts normally held by civilians, such as governors, mayors and directors of major public corporations.

But perhaps the surest sign is the military buildup under way in the five provinces bordering Iraq. The region, with a population of 20 million, has been put

under the control of the IRGC, which has also taken over units of the regular army (including the 88th Division) and the border police. Iran is estimated to have 250,000 troops in the area, its biggest military buildup since the 1988 end of the Iran-Iraq war.

One of the first acts of the new Ahmadinejad-led Cabinet was to approve a \$700 million “emergency” fund to be spent at the discretion of “Supreme Guide” Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for “sacred defense purposes.”

The new administration is also speeding up defense spending. The five-year plan approved by Khamenei last year aimed at doubling the military budget by 2010 — but, thanks to rising oil revenues, most of it could now be done by 2008.

Where this leaves the Bush administration and its efforts to reshape the Middle East and bring stability to the region is anyone’s guess. I’m not sure that even the administration knows where it stands and what its intentions regarding Iran are. For the time being, I suspect that Bush et al. will simply issue a warning to the Iranians that any large scale attacks on American civilians will be met with retaliation against Iranian mullahs, just as the attack against Americans of 9/11 was met with retaliation against the Taliban. This warning will have to be broad, blunt and unequivocal.

About half-way through *The Godfather*, Don Corleone accepts an accommodation with his enemies but, at the same time, issues a threat to those enemies, noting that any breach of their accommodation will be met with swift retribution. He says:

I have selfish reasons. My youngest son was forced to leave this country, because of this Sollozzo business. All right, and I have to make arrangements to bring him back here safely, cleared of all these false charges.

But I’m a superstitious man, and if some unlucky accident should befall him; if he should get shot in the head by a police officer; or if he should hang himself in his jail cell; or if he’s struck by a bolt of lightning, then I’m going to blame some of the people in this room. And that, I do not forgive.

In the short term, this is precisely the type of threat the Bush administration will have to issue the Iranians. Any breach of the peace — any attack, whether directly tied to the Iranians or not — will have to be met with devastating retribution. The Iranians have to be given some incentive for keeping the peace, and it is hard to imagine that anything less than a threat to “not forgive” would, at this point, be sufficient.

In the long term, the administration will have to develop a more coherent plan both to stall the Mullah’s drive toward joining the nuclear club and to thwart Iranian plans to impose their will on the greater Middle East, particularly on Shi’ite dominated Iraq. As in *The Godfather*, the threat-backed accommodation of Iranian ambitions must serve merely to buy time until we can figure out how to consolidate our power and deal with Iranian aggressors. I suspect that this long-term plan will look something like the picture painted by Mark last week, which depicted “pulverizing air strikes designed to totally incapacitate the enemy’s ability to fight back with no regard to the cost of the post-war rebuilding effort and no intention of participating in it.”

In any case, the day of reckoning with regard to Iran is swiftly approaching. I understand that the Bush administration has its hands full in Iraq right now, but the fact of the matter is that neither that particular battle nor the larger war on terror will be successfully prosecuted unless and until the Islamic Republic is confronted. The war on terror began in Iran some twenty-six years ago, and it likely will end there as well. The only question is when.

CURMUDGEONLY THOUGHTS ABOUT KATRINA.

I used to enjoy drinking more than what might be considered prudent. I eventually cut that out (for the most part) not because I stopped enjoying it, but because I just couldn't tolerate the hangovers anymore. I have known a lot of men who didn't suffer from the kind of horrible hangovers I used to get. They could drink and drink, well into the wee small hours of the morning, and then get up at 7:00 A.M. and play 18 holes of golf while I was still wondering whether I was going to live. At the time, I envied them. Today I realize that my shortcoming was a blessing and, in many cases, their blessing was a curse.

I got to thinking about this late last week while listening to President Bush expound on how much money the United States was going to borrow and spend on the Hurricane Katrina disaster relief effort, on top of all that the nation is already borrowing to pay for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the energy bill, the transportation bill, the new drug benefit for the elderly, the no-child-left-behind initiative, and the much-greater-than-inflation spending increases for all of the government programs that absolutely cannot be cut back because they are all so terribly important.

I wondered whether it is such a blessing for a nation to be so incredibly strong that it can abuse its borrowing power so badly without suffering any apparent ill effects. Katrina hits, President Bush announces that the nation will borrow as much as it takes to make everyone happy again. "It's going to cost whatever it costs," the generous Texan said. No limit. Some folks may have to pay the fiddler when they dance, but not the United States. Party hard tonight. Play golf in the morning.

I am not smart enough to know where this is leading. It may be that the nation's borrowing power is far, far greater than I am capable of imaging and that there is absolutely nothing about which to worry. I sincerely hope this is the case. That seems to be what my old friend Ed Yardeni's "bond vigilantes" are telling us.

And as I have noted numerous times in these pages, it is also true that the United States is borrowing all this money in dollars and it has a machine that makes them. So there is, of course, no fear of ever defaulting on the debt, at least in the legalistic sense. If it gets nasty, the government can just print Federal Reserve Notes in larger denominations (say, single bills with a face value of \$50,000,000,000 with President Bush's picture on them) and start handing them to its creditors in exchange for "Paid in Full" slips.

Indeed, perhaps this whole thing is part of a fabulous plan by some genius in the Bush administration to screw the Chinese, to sell these hapless communists billions of dollars of American bonds, then pay them off with worthless paper someday when they need funds to take care of their aged population. Welcome to capitalism, General Tso!

As I say, I'm not smart enough to figure all this out. What I do know with absolute certainty is that the United States government will borrow until no one will loan it money anymore. There is no internal political or bureaucratic restraining mechanism that is powerful enough to stop or even slow the borrowing. None! Zero! Gramm-Rudman didn't work. A brief flirtation with an actual balanced budget didn't work. Putting a "conservative" in the White House and giving him a GOP Congress didn't work. My guess is that Ed's "bond vigilantes" will eventually bring the borrowing binge to a halt. Hopefully they will do it slowly, over a period of time, via the introduction of a series of small, painful but not life threatening hangovers, rather than all at once via the total collapse of liver function. But they will do it. The question is not whether but when.

As the President said shortly after the Katrina clean up began, this is not the time for playing the blame game. This situation is no more this President's fault than it is Ted Kennedy's. If President Bush were to propose any specific cuts in federal spending of a size that would make a difference, he would be branded a racist by the left, anti-business by the right, and a lunatic by the center. And the cuts wouldn't be made anyway.

Even the staunchly conservative House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, who is generally a tough cookie when it comes to partisan politics, won't risk the drubbing that he would get for making any serious attempt at cutting even the growth in federal spending. In fact, the other day he took a page out of Roberto Duran's art of boxing book and opted for the "no mas" defense on this issue, stating flatly that he doesn't think that there is any "appreciable fat" in the federal budget.

While I am not a determinist, it is quite clear that deterministic elements are at work here. I won't discuss them in detail because I have done it so many times before in these pages. But I will offer a smattering of paragraphs and observations from prior pieces dating back over ten years as a means of providing readers with a sense of the historic trends that are driving the growth in the federal establishment at a pace that is far beyond the ability of the public to finance it through normal tax receipts.

There is Max Weber's observation that as a society becomes more technologically and socially complex, government grows naturally larger due to the increasing demand for bureaucrats who are trained to manage the intricate tasks involved in making such a society run smoothly.

There are a variety of theories that are based on the comparison between the wide distribution of government largess in a modern welfare state and the relatively narrow collection base in a state that is financed by a steeply graduated income tax. Most of these theories conclude that the constituency for smaller government grows smaller as the size of the government grows larger.

There is Melcher's "Frankenstein monster" theory [that] the rough bureaucratic beast, which politicians created to help them implement their ideas and plans, now has a mind of its own and a voracious appetite. It

demands to be fed an ever-increasing share of the national treasure, snarling at even a hint of a cutback in its huge rations. It regularly refuses to obey orders it doesn't like. It issues, with little if any oversight, tens of thousands of "regulations" a week, which have the full force of law behind them and which directly impact virtually every aspect of American life. More importantly, the beast is constantly building new, and shoring up old coalitions with giant private interest groups, many of which have become more powerful than any of three traditional branches of government.

And there is Tocqueville's famous, dire vision, articulated by him 165 years ago, concerning the future of the American democratic state, namely that, "after having thus successfully taken each member of the community in its powerful grasp, and fashioned him at will, the supreme power then extends its arm over the whole community. It covers the surface of society with a network of small, complicated rules, minute and uniform, through which the most original minds and the most energetic characters cannot penetrate to rise above the crowd. The will of man is not shattered but softened, bent and guided; men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting. Such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to be nothing better than a flock of timid and industrial animals, of which the government is the shepherd."

I could go on, of course, but I won't. The point is that if it weren't Katrina it would be something else. The federal government's appetite for money and power is a function of factors that are far more elemental and destructive than a mere category five hurricane.

Of course, I can't end on such a pessimistic note. There has to be something that someone can do. Right? Right. So I will close with one suggestion that might help at least to delay the coming fiscal Armageddon.

My suggestion is to vote for a Democrat in the next presidential election. Vote for Hillary Clinton if she is the Party's nominee, but urge the Democrats to select someone who is even more liberal, say Nancy Pelosi or Howard Dean or Ted Kennedy, and vote for him or her.

The reason? Well, I love my country and I have come to the conclusion that more than anything in the world right now, it desperately needs a strong, conservative, opposition party. When Republicans are in the majority they become big spending liberals. They become worthless. They can't help it. The forces at work on them are too great to resist. Making things worse, liberals are absolutely useless when they are in the minority. They are incapable of acting as a meaningful opposition force. They roll around on the floor and chew the carpet. The bottom line is that it is neither natural nor healthy to have a conservative majority and a liberal minority in this country at this time.

An ultra liberal Democratic president could not possibly spend more money than George Bush and his fellow Republicans, nor could he or she spend it more enthusiastically and with less concern about the consequences. It is possible, however, that if an ultra-liberal Democrat were in the White House the Republicans would return naturally to the role of a conservative opposition party, fighting on behalf of fiscal responsibility and a slow down in the growth of government.

Of course, Republicans could not stop either the fiscal hemorrhaging or the growth of the Leviathan. But they might be able to slow it down a little by bringing back that sublime condition that I used to describe as "blessed gridlock," which is all anyone can realistically expect, at least until the hangovers start, or the liver explodes.

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