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THEY SAID IT

Even were one to believe that, despite its low and stagnant per capita GNP and the world's second-largest reserves of petroleum and natural gas, Iran would invest uneconomically in nuclear power generation, one would also have to disbelieve that it wanted nuclear weapons. But with an intermediate-range strategic nuclear capacity it could deter American intervention, reign over the Gulf, further separate Europe from American Middle East policy, correct a nuclear imbalance with Pakistan, lead and perhaps unify the Islamic world, and thus create the chance to end Western dominance of the Middle East and with a single shot destroy Israel.

Mark Helprin's submission to "How To Eliminate Iran's Nuclear Weapons: A Symposium," *Claremont Review of Books*, Volume VI, Number 2, Spring 2006.

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WHITHER IRAN?

Last month The Political Forum marked its fourth birthday and thanks to a small number of loyal subscribers we fully expect to be around to celebrate the fifth next spring. Looking back, we are pleased with our record of forecasts. One bad one sticks out though and that will be the subject of this piece. It was written in late July 2004 and was entitled "Bush Unbound." The prediction was that "sometime soon after Bush is reelected" he would go on the offensive against Iran, including air strikes and possibly even military incursions along the border with Iraq, sending a message to the Mullahs, and to Syria and North Korea as well, that the gloves are off. The reasoning behind this prediction was as follows:

I simply cannot imagine that President Bush will spend his second term sitting on his hands watching as Iran and North Korea build nuclear weapons. And I cannot help but assume that if he finds that he cannot prevent these two states from becoming nuclear powers with non-military measures, then he will, to paraphrase his own words, militarily "confront the threats before they fully materialize."

Nor can I imagine that Bush will sit back and watch quietly as Iran aggressively supports the insurgency in Iraq, thus threatening what is certainly the most important foreign policy initiative of his first term and what is likely to be the historical centerpiece of his entire presidency. I think that a better bet is that he will move and move hard against Iran following his reelection.

Looking back, it is clear that we made one of the most common mistakes in the great art of prognostication, which is to decide what we would do under the circumstances and to assume that that is what the actual actor will do. Needless to say, President Bush did not do what we would have done. So be it. As a very smart Frenchman said many years ago, the heart has reasons of which reason knows nothing.

In any case, the administration took the road most traveled, which is to say that it all but ignored the problem in hopes that it would just go away. And today, Iran is much closer to having a nuclear weapon than it was a year and a half ago and even more deeply involved in a variety of nefarious efforts to undermine America's plans for a democratic Iraq. Also, Iran's leaders have had additional time to harden their nuclear facilities against air strikes, to convince even their critics at home that Iran has a "right" to become a nuclear power, and to garner support for their nuclear ambitions from China and Russia. In addition, they have become flush with money due to sky-high oil prices.

The question going forward, therefore, is, "What now?" We are aware that no one can be confident in answering a question like this. But we maintain, as we have often done, that attempting to foresee how events are likely to unfold is useful in and of itself because the process forces one to think about the situation in concrete terms and to make reasonable judgments on the probabilities of the various possibilities.

So we will begin this process by stating our belief that while the Pentagon certainly has multiple contingency plans for attacking Iran and would implement one of them if the Islamic Republic became a clear and present nuclear danger to the United States or its allies, it is quite apparent that the Bush administration has no more intention of taking any sort of military action against Iran any time soon than it did almost two years ago when we predicted that it would.

We base this assumption on several factors: The first is the total absence of any saber rattling. If the administration were truly considering a pre-emptive military strike against Iran, it would almost certainly strut and bluster a little bit beforehand. This would serve two purposes. It would provide an opportunity to gain some insights into what kind of reactions it could expect from friends and enemies around the world. And it would provide the Iranians with an opportunity to back down before a midnight firestorm marked the opening of festivities.

Second, there does not appear to be any group of foreign policy gurus anywhere that is advocating any kind of military strike. Our assumption is that if the administration were contemplating such a thing it would try to create a public demand for it and a cheering section of some sort. Even the so-called neo-conservatives are not beating the war drums at this time. And this is probably significant.

Third, the administration's efforts to elicit United Nations condemnation of Iran and to convince the Europeans, the Russians, and the Chinese to join in a peaceful effort to convince Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions appear to be both intense enough and obsequious enough to dispel any thoughts that it might be a smokescreen to cover up plans for unilateral, military action.

It remains to be seen whether the United States can persuade Iran to abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons without employing any sort of credible threat of military action. We confess to having strong doubts about this. In fact, our thinking hasn't changed much since July 2004. We thought then that a good part of the problem President Bush faced relative to Iran was that the Iranian leaders did not believe that there was any downside to continuing their pursuit of nuclear weapons. We still think that is the case. Only we no longer believe that President Bush has any plans to remedy this situation, short of going to the United Nations and beating his shoe on the table.

In July 2004, we thought Bush would recognize the need to put the mullahs on the defensive. We thought he would do this by employing a little military muscle against the Iranians. We thought that he would recognize that the United States' position in the upcoming global debates over this nasty situation would be more favorable if the focus were on what concessions Iran needed to make in order to keep the crazy America cowboy from blowing things up over there. We thought President Bush would decide that this would be preferable to the global debate that is occurring today, which is focused on what concessions America needs to make in order to keep the crazy Iranian cowboy from blowing things up over there.

Of course, we were wrong back then to think that Bush would employ a little military force to lend credibility to his diplomatic efforts. And we were wrong to think that he would move quickly after his reelection to address the problem in Iran. There is no way to know whether things would be better today if he had done what we expected. But we do know that his failure to do anything at all for the past year and a half has put him in a situation where he has very few options left.

A few weeks ago, the *Wall Street Journal* made this point loudly and clearly in an editorial entitled "Bush and Iran." The piece was unusually long, taking up the space of two ordinary editorials. It went on and on about the dire nature of the problem. It derided "the idea that Iran is still a decade away from a bomb" as "wishful thinking;" stated that time was running out and that "the Iranian bomb will thus be a crisis for this Administration, not the next;" offered a highly pessimistic assessment of the efficacy of sanctions; cast doubt on the usefulness of direct talks with Iran; and complained that the administration has done nothing meaningful to "confront the tough choices ahead."

Now, at that moment when most editorials would launch into the advice-giving phase, which is what editorialists get paid to do, the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial board balked, writing, "Our point today is not to advocate any specific course of action." We don't mean to pick on the members of *Journal's*

editorial board, particularly since some are friends of the Political Forum, but their actual point was hardly as specific as we had hoped. What they suggested the President do at this stage is get on with a "candid discussion about the nature and urgency of the Iranian threat" with the goal of educating the American public as to "what is at stake in Iran and what the U.S. might be prepared to do about it."

To say the least, this underscores the problem with having this discussion in 2006. The *Journal's* editorial board writes about what the U.S. "might be prepared to do" now because neither they nor anyone else apparently wants to discuss what the U.S. "must be prepared to do." This is, in other words, a discussion that the President should have had with the American public two years ago, as we believed he would. The fact that he didn't goes a long way toward explaining why his options are so limited today.

As it stands now, the Bush crowd appears to be willing to use just two of the arrows in its quiver, and neither one is very sharp. The first is to continue its on-going efforts to gain U.N. support for sanctions and boycotts against Iran. This will either fail entirely or fail to produce the kind of sanctions and boycotts that would force Iran to relent. There are a numbers of reasons for this. One, which has been thoroughly discussed by everyone who has written or talked publicly on the subject, is that neither Russia nor China will go along with any such action.

Another, which seems to us to be even more important, is that nothing any nation or group of nations can do to Iran, short of blowing it up, can offset, in the minds of Ahmadinejad and his followers, the glory of becoming the first Islamic, nuclear super power, as well as the advance team for the return of the Mahdi, or so-called 12th Imam. As we have noted before in these pages, Ahmadinejad and his buddies believe this guy has been hiding in a well for the past 1,000 or so years, and will emerge like Punxsutawney Phil sometime in the next two years, not as a herald of spring but as a harbinger of cataclysmic confrontation with evil and darkness leading to universal peace. Now I ask you, would anyone give up the opportunity

to witness his apocalyptic occasion simply because of the threat of not being able to compete in World Cup soccer competition? I don't think so.

The second arrow in President Bush's quiver is a little sharper, but not much. It involves a \$75 million plan to undermine the Ahmadinejad's government via a host of covert and overt activities. A lot of foreign policy pundits seem to think that there is a powerful, pro-democratic, silent majority movement within Iran that would be capable of overthrowing the Iranian government and installing one that is friendly to the West, if only it had a little financial help and moral support from the United States. We applaud this effort and sincerely hope that it will work. But we have no way of knowing whether such a hope is realistic.

It should be said however that our skepticism on this subject is fed by a number of factors, including a suspicion that the United States has not been very good at that sort of thing since the 1970s, when the combined efforts of Jimmy Carter, Stansfield Turner, and Philip Agee all but destroyed the Agency's human intelligence capability.

The bottom line on all of this is that the Bush administration has decided by default, via a combination of stupidity and timidity, to let the Iranian people dictate how the battle with the Great Satan will proceed.

If the Iranians rid themselves of the present, fanatical government, either by coup or assassination, and then dump that government's plans to develop a nuclear weapon, the United States will do all it can to reestablish friendly relations with that country.

If instead, the Iranians move ahead with their plans to develop a nuclear weapon, the United States will either honor its pledge to stop this from happening with military force or it will learn to live with it via some variation on the old mutually assured destruction process. This one might be called "unilaterally assured destruction" since Iran will not have the power to destroy the United States while the United States will most certainly destroy Iran should the Muslim "super power" use atomic weapons against it.

While awaiting this decision by the Iranian people, the United States will make a globe-wide spectacle of itself by puttering around the United Nations trying to get some sort of toothless resolution against Iran. And it will conduct an endless stream of lickspittle diplomatic talks with Russia, China, and the Europeans, all to no avail.

This is a terrible way to run the world's sole remaining super power. But then, the United States hasn't had a lot of experience in this field yet. That's coming, however, probably at a very high cost, which is not unusual since experience is almost always costly.

HUGO CHAVEZ AND THE RISE OF THE GLOBAL LEFT?

It is hardly a secret that while the Western powers are rightly preoccupied with the danger posed by Islamofascism, another serious threat to global stability is growing – and growing stronger – in Latin America.

Eight years ago, Hugo Chavez took power in Venezuela, allied himself with Cuba's octogenarian "strongman" Fidel Castro, launched an internal war against his political opponents, and declared himself an enemy of the United States. In the intervening years, he has consolidated power domestically by simply rounding up political opponents, has supported narco-terrorists in neighboring Columbia, has forged a friendship with the Mad Mullahs of Iran, has grown fat and rich from exploding oil prices, and has exported his "revolution" to as many of his neighbors as he could.

Today, Chavez fancies himself a champion of the world's poor and the chief thorn in the side of the American hegemon. Indeed, as if to prove this point, while in London over the weekend, Chavez declared "the final hours of the North American empire have arrived . . . Now we have to say to the empire: 'We're not afraid of you. You're a paper tiger.'"

While there is no question that Chavez is a menace to the civilized world, there is considerable uncertainty about the type of menace he is and therefore about the scope of the problem he poses. Because he is partial to populist rhetoric and has allied himself with Senor Castro, the world's last remaining Soviet despot, Chavez is generally referred to in the press as a "Marxist," a "Communist," or, at the very least, a "leftist." Moreover, the resurgence in like-minded populists throughout Latin America, from Brazil to Bolivia and from Argentina to Mexico, has given rise to fears that Marxism itself is resurgent and that Chavez's rise in the late '90s was the precursor to a global increase in leftist political ideology.

Last week, the British historian Niall Ferguson addressed this very issue in a *Los Angeles Times* column. Calling "a worldwide political shift to the left" a "high-probability high-impact event" Professor Ferguson wrote thusly:

It's already happening. The headline event has been the decision by newly elected Bolivian President Evo Morales — predicted in this column Feb. 13 — to nationalize his country's energy sector.

But the swing to the left is not a purely Latin American story. The left won last month's Italian elections. The French government recently caved in to street protests by trade unions and leftist students. And in the United States, the Democrats are poised to make gains in the November midterm elections.

The reason so many commentators are missing this political shift is that, as relatively high earners, they are mostly cut off from its social drivers.

Now clearly, there is trouble in Latin America, and it is indeed trouble with a leftist flair. For the entirety of his presidency, Chavez has been fighting with foreign oil companies, trying desperately to seize greater control of his nation's enormous oil production

business for the state and a greater portion of his nation's enormous oil profits for himself and his regime. Chavez has been appropriating more and more of the oil business since 2001 and just last month decided to commandeer even an even greater share. As *The Wall Street Journal* reported:

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez is planning a new assault on Big Oil, potentially taking a major step toward nationalization of Venezuela's oil industry that could hurt oil-company profits, reduce production and put further pressure on global oil prices.

Venezuela's Congress, made up entirely of Mr. Chávez's allies, is considering sharply raising taxes and royalties on foreign companies' operations in the Orinoco River basin, the country's richest oil deposit. Major oil companies like Exxon Mobile Corp. and ConocoPhillips of the U.S. and Total SA of France have invested billions of dollars there to turn the basin's characteristically tar-like oil into some 600,000 barrels a day of lighter, synthetic crude.

Mr. Chávez, a left-wing populist who favors greater state control of the economy, also wants to seize majority control of the four Orinoco projects and force private companies who run them to accept a minority stake, according to a top executive at state-run oil company Petróleos de Venezuela SA, known as PdVSA.

Of course, as Ferguson noted, Chavez's ally in Bolivia, Evo Morales, recently did his friend and patron one better, seizing near complete control of his country's gas reserves and promising that energy was only the beginning of his nationalization campaign, with (again, in the words of the *Journal*) "mining, forestry and other sectors of the economy" next on his agenda. In addition, Chavez has allied himself with former Soviet-era retread Daniel Ortega, who is once again

running for president in Nicaragua; is supporting (legally and, allegedly, illegally) Mexican leftist Andrés Manuel López Obrador in his run at his country's presidency; and has ingratiated himself with politicians on the far left fringes, both in the United States (Massachusetts Congressman William Delahunt) and in Europe (London Mayor "Red" Ken Livingstone).

All of this leaves us with two questions, the answers to which will suggest the scope of the problem represented by Chavez and his fellow radicals and the likely outcome of this revolutionary resurgence.

The first one goes as follows: Is professor Ferguson correct; has there been a worldwide 'shift to the left?' And the answer is, in our estimation, a resounding no.

A close examination of what is going on in Latin America suggests that the "Bolivarian Revolution" of which Chavez is so proud, is not based on ideology, leftist or otherwise, but on pure power. Chavez is, obviously, a populist, and he has made the co-optation of the under classes a political priority. But he is hardly a Maoist, or a Leninist, or even a full-fledged Castroite. He is, simply, a thug; a thug in the grand tradition of Latin American thugs; a thug concerned much less about the class struggle or the "reconstitution of society at large" than he is about the accumulation of power; a thug who is determined to antagonize the United States and its nominally right-of-center regime, not out of leftist ideological fervor, but out of sheer lust for power and in the knowledge that President Bush and the United States are the principal threats to his accumulation of that power.

Last week, Marifeli Pérez-Stable, the vice president for democratic governance at the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington, D.C. and a professor at Florida International University, called Chavez (and Morales and Peruvian presidential candidate Ollanta Humala) "corporatists." She could just as easily have called them fascists, or statists, or a handful of other "-ists."

Fans of Chavez often point to his efforts to aid "the poor" and his literacy campaigns and the success of his free health clinics and his "missions" to the poorest regions of his country. But any success he has had in ministering to the underclass, in his country or elsewhere, has been made possible not because of the efficiency of his economic "reforms" but because he and his regime are flush with the cash provided by the dramatic run-up in oil prices. Chavez may be a hero to the left, but in practice, his governing strategy is evocative not of the old-line Soviet model, but of the contemporary Saudi model, which uses the energy largesse provided by the global energy squeeze to co-opt the poor and ease their burdens.

But why, then, does Chavez hold such great appeal for Western liberals? Why does this human rights violator extraordinaire and uber-oil baron so excite Western leftists like Ken Livingstone, William Delahunt, and Bobby Kennedy's oldest son, Joseph P.?

A cynic might conclude simply that Western leftists have always had a soft spot for such thugs. And, indeed, they have. But support for Chavez today represents something different. It is, in essence, a primal scream on the part of world's powerless. To the poor, he's a class warrior. To the nations of the world upset at American global dominance, he's a leader who will "speak truth to power," in this case to the hyper-power. To the American and Western left, he is a sharp stick to poke in George W. Bush's eye. All of those who see themselves as displaced or disenfranchised by the global upheaval that has taken place since the end of the Cold War and the start of the war on terror can find something to love in Chavez.

Now, the second question is this: If he talks like a leftist, and acts like a leftist, and affects the global economy through his statist meddling in his nation's monstrously important oil business, does it matter that he's not really a leftist?" And the answer is, surprisingly, yes it matters.

Chavez may be everything to everyone in the blame-America-first crowd, but he is not the harbinger of a global leftist revolution or even of a global leftist resurgence.

Recall that in his piece on the threat posed by the resurgent left, Niall Ferguson noted that the leftist surge is not strictly a Latin American phenomenon. As evidence of this conclusion, he cited recent developments in Europe. Among other things, he wrote, “the left won last month’s Italian elections. The French government recently caved in to street protests by trade unions and leftist students.” Let’s take these in order.

First, the only reason the leftists won in Italy is because a center-right government was in power. Now, if that seems a bit tautological to you, you’re right. But the fact of the matter is that the norm in Western Europe and in Italy in particular is center-left governance. The aberration in this case was Silvio Berlusconi’s center-right government, and no one should be surprised that Italy ousted its “conservatives.” Reverting to the norm is hardly representative of a trend or any great shift to left.

Italy is not, we should note, particularly unique in this sense. If anything, the last several years have seen a genuine global political shift to the right, at least among Western nations. The German government, while divided, is far right of where it was two, three, or five years ago. The second *intifada* and the war on terror pushed the Israelis to the right. The Australians elected and re-elected conservative John Howard. The Canadians just moved rightward, ousting their ruling liberal elites, whose stranglehold on power (and propensity for corruption) may well have been rivaled only by Mexico’s PRI during the 20th Century. And while the Brits have run screaming from their “conservatives,” they have, despite predictions to the contrary, been unwilling or unable to remove Tony Blair in favor of his far more left-leaning Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown.

Even if some or most of these governments are replaced by administrations further to the left over the next several years, this will hardly constitute any dramatic leftward shift. As with Italy, reversion to the norm is hardly indicative of anything out of the normal.

As for Ferguson’s concern about the French caving in “to street protests by trade unions and leftist students,” all we can do is ask why anyone would be surprised by this. Talk about reverting to the norm. Why did the French government surrender to the angry mob? Because that’s what the French do. It’s what they have always done – at least since 1789. Again, this is hardly suggestive of any trend.

As further evidence of the rise of the left, Ferguson cites the Democrats’ revival and the expectation that they will “make gains in the November midterm elections.” Is he serious?

First, there is certainly no guarantee that the Democrats are going to make any gains, large or small, this November. Smart money says they will make gains, but that these gains will be small. In either case, the driving forces would, once again, be longstanding trends, in this case historical averages and midterm in-power partisan decline, not any sort of ideological shift.

More to the point, the Democrats are a total mess as a political party. They’re split on matters of war and national security, with the most vocal and best-financed wing of the party insisting that the war is a figment of George Bush’s fevered imagination. They have no idea what they stand for or believe. They have no agenda and no meaningful ideas. Their entire *de facto* political platform consists of standing around and screaming about how George W. Bush is the source of all evil in the world.

The only question unanswered about the Democrats is whether they will, come November, be just slightly more or just slightly less of a mess than the equally dysfunctional Republicans. We have written countless times that today’s Republicans are fortunate in that they have today’s Democrats as their political foes. More and more it looks as if the inverse is true as well. If the Republicans could stop trying to throw each other under the proverbial bus for five minutes and manage to get their primordial isolationist urges under control, they’d destroy the allegedly resurgent

Democrats. But they can't. And they won't. And so the Democrats may well pick up a few seats here and there.

Of course, even if they manage to pick up more than a few and to win control of one or more of the houses of Congress, that will hardly be indicative of an up-tick in leftist fortunes in the United States. Remember that the last successful Democratic president governed far to the right of both Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. Republicans have, over the past couple of decades, become just as populous as Democrats among the electorate for the first time since before the Great Depression. And conservative ideas are still predominant. As the inimitable Michael Barone put it this morning: "it remains true in America and Britain that the policies of the right are more acceptable than the policies of the left . . . we continue to live in the world of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, as we once lived in the world of Franklin D. Roosevelt."

As for the rest of world, an anticipated leftist surge is hardly likely in most of the places that matter. The Chinese with their new wealth, which comes courtesy of freer markets and capitalist reforms, are hardly likely to decide that they were better off when they were economically oppressed in addition to being merely politically oppressed. The Indians as well are unlikely to want to give back their newly minted cash and go back to the way things were in the pre-telemarketing Dark Ages. And does anyone actually think that the South Koreans are on the verge of throwing up their hands and declaring that they've had enough of a divided peninsula and want to be reunited with their Northern cousins under the benevolent leadership of Kim Ding Dong?

The bottom line here is that Marxism, Socialism, Communism, or whatever you want to call it, is pretty much done. We don't know if we'd go so far as Fukuyama did and declare the end of history. But clearly some ideas are past their prime.

Hugo Chavez can bluster and bully all he wants, and his American and European fans can gush about how macho and charismatic he looks when he does so. But the fact remains that this is not indicative of a resurgence of the left, as Niall Ferguson fears, but a reversion to child-like behavior, as we put it only a few weeks back. This is not to say that Chavez and like-minded goons throughout Latin America do not present a problem. They do, and a serious problem at that. But they do not present a strictly "leftist" problem. Labeling their rise a leftist phenomenon both misstates the nature and the scope of the problem and, by extension, suggests inappropriate solutions.

Sure, American and European liberals will clap and cheer for their "ideological soul mate" Chavez. But given that he is a despot who imprisons and/or kills his political opponents, that should come as no surprise. After all, they tend to gravitate to such men. Fortunately, he is no more a "leftist" than Juan Peron. And his ascension has little to do with a global leftist resurgence.

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