

Mark L. Melcher Publisher
melcher@thepoliticalforum.com

Stephen R. Soukup Editor
soukup@thepoliticalforum.com

THEY SAID IT

Alas, we know very well that ideals can never be completely embodied in practice. Ideals must ever lie a very great way off, and we will right thankfully content ourselves with any not intolerable approximation thereto! Let no man, as Schiller says, too querulously 'measure by a scale of perfection the meagre product of reality' in this poor world of ours. We will esteem him no wise man; we will esteem him a sickly, discontented, foolish man. And yet, on the other hand, it is never to be forgotten that ideals do exist; that if they be not approximated to at all, the whole matter goes to wreck! Infallibly. No bricklayer builds a wall perfectly perpendicular, mathematically this is not possible; a certain degree of perpendicularity suffices him; and he, like a good bricklayer, who must have done with his job, leaves it so. And yet if he sway too much from the perpendicular; above all, if he throw plummet and level quite away from him, and pile brick on brick heedless, just as it comes to hand – ! Such bricklayer, I think, is in a bad way. He has forgotten himself; but the law of gravitation does not forget to act on him; he and his wall rush-down into a confused welter of ruin!

Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, And the Heroic in History*, 1841.

THE WIMP FACTOR.

As regular readers know, we have lost confidence in our ability to predict what course President Bush is likely to take when dealing with most of the major issues of the day. We know he's against abortion and stem cell research, in favor of big government and happy immigrants, and seems to like the United Nations a great deal. But we have given up trying to discover some underlying philosophy or personality trait that might provide real guidance to seers.

We have some ideas on the subject, of course. As we noted several weeks ago, on day-to-day political matters, he seems to have no stomach for a good knock-down-drag-out fight. No sand, as we put it. One gets the impression that George's parents taught him that a man from an Eastern aristocratic family such as his always has to fight fair and be a good loser, two characteristics that combine to make an excellent next-door neighbor and tennis opponent, but puts him at a distinct disadvantage when dealing with Democrats and Arabs.

But this is not the stuff from which good predictions are made. Thus, as a practical matter, we have abandoned the "here's what we would do, and he's a smart guy, so that's what he think he will do" method of forecasting his future actions. In fact, as we said earlier, we have given up the task of even trying to forecast his future actions. With President Bush does "all options are on the table" really mean that all options are

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The Political Forum LLC 8563 Senedo Road, Mt. Jackson, Virginia 22842
Phone 540.477.9762 Fax 540.477.3359 melcher@thepoliticalforum.com www.thepoliticalforum.com

on the table, or that he just hopes that the bad guys believe that all options are on the table? You tell us. The scary thing is that the Iranians and Israelis probably don't know either.

In any case, our new forecasting formula is to say what we would do and predict what will happen if something of this nature isn't done. It's not really the same as forecasting, of course, but it is a reasonable literary device for discussing some ideas. So here goes.

The first thing the President needs to do is join in the fight against the Democratic attack on the war in Iraq. He needs to come out swinging, using every weapon that the power of his office affords him. He needs to understand that this is no longer about him. It is not about his reputation. It is not about his legacy. He can feel comfortable that he is not doing anything unseemly by defending himself. This is about the future security of the United States.

He also needs to understand that it no longer matters whether he should or should not have launched the war in Iraq and whether the democracy thing was a dumb idea. Historians will decide those issues many years from now. Relative to this, he should keep in mind the old saw that history is written by the winners. But that's beside the point. The point now is that if the Democrats succeed in achieving defeat in Iraq, the good old U.S. of A. is in big trouble and many more people will die in the wars that follow than will die in the ongoing conflict in Iraq, even if that conflict stays on-going in its current form for decades to come.

This is not a defense of George Bush or of the war. It is a defense of not leaving Iraq in a state of chaos and civil war and expecting that this would have no serious consequences to American interests at home or abroad.

There is a quaint theory making the rounds that only a Democratic president could unify the nation behind a plan to bring the war to a satisfactory conclusion. The idea is that the election of a hawkish Republican in 2008 would rouse the antiwar crowd to even greater heights of outrage and would eventually lead to a

constitutional crisis. Conversely, this theory holds that the election of a Democratic would assuage the anger that is shared by American liberals and militant Muslims over George Bush's evil actions and intentions around the world. This would open the door for a peace agreement between a contrite American government and a generous and forgiving conglomeration of militant Islamic groups from all points of the globe.

The Islamists, having no reason anymore to be angry at the United States, could then concentrate on the eradication of Israel and the colonization of Europe, thus destroying the cradle of Western civilization, which both they and the American left hate. And America's aging, liberal baby boomers could spend their twilight years singing Kumbaya and enjoying the Age of Aquarius for which they had yearned in their salad days.

Doubtless, Democrats would argue that this is not their plan. But what then is it? For while it may be true, as they maintain, that President Bush entered Iraq with no plan for victory, it is equally true that Democrats want to leave that nation with no plan for defeat. Indeed, not one of the leading Democratic presidential contenders, nor any of the most vocal antiwar critics, have offered any insight whatsoever into what would happen, and what American should do, if control of Iraq fell into the hands of Islamists who ally themselves with a nuclear armed Iran against America and American interests in the Gulf.

The fact of the matter is that the Democratic position on Iraq is irresponsible in the extreme. It endangers America and America's friends and allies. It gives aid and comfort to the enemy during wartime, which may not be a crime anymore, but it is a travesty. It is the kind of thing that wouldn't occur in a healthy society, or even in one as sick as the United States is today if it were led by a President with some fight in him.

Contrary to popular media opinion, it is not the job of Rudolph Giuliani, John McCain, Mitt Romney, or even Joe Lieberman to defend George Bush and the war in Iraq. It is George Bush's job as Commander

in Chief. It is also George Bush's job, as head of the Republican Party, to do everything he can to see that a Republican is elected President in 2008. While it may be too late to convince the American public that the war in Iraq was a good idea, or that democratization will eventually turn the world into a fun loving place, it is not too late for President Bush to use the power of his office to wage war on the cut-and-run crowd, thus easing the way for a Republican to win the White House in 2008.

Now as we said earlier, we have no idea what President Bush will do between now and the election to help the cause. Our guess is that he will do little or nothing. But, as we said earlier, he needs to join in the fight against the Democratic attack on the war in Iraq in a big way. He needs to forcefully defend the war, the surge, and his handling of it, and to demand that his Democratic Party critics explain what they would do now – not what they would have done, but what they would do now — and discuss what likely consequences such a course of action would have to America's future security.

As we said several weeks ago, if he believes in what he is doing, then he needs to get angry at those who would thwart him. And he needs to fight back. To borrow a term from hockey, he needs to become the Republican Party's enforcer. He needs to attack those who attack him and the war in Iraq and his fellow Republicans. He needs to attack those who endanger the morale and the lives of American soldiers fighting in Iraq. He needs to attack those who deliberately play into the strategic plans of America's enemies. He needs to smoke them out. Yes indeed, he needs to publicly question their patriotism, to start a fight and force them to defend themselves. He needs to question their judgment, their commitment to the security of the nation. He needs to make them angry, defensive. He needs to squeeze a little bile of them and in doing so force them to address what would happen if their plans were implemented and chaos resulted.

He needs to take of the "kick me" sign off his back. He needs to soften Hillary and Barack up for Rudy, John, and Mitt. These two Democratic Party poster

children for surrender are intrinsically weak right now because they are fighting each other. He needs to take advantage of this opportunity, climb in the ring with them, stick a thumb in an eye, a knee in a kidney, take them off message day after day, question the judgment of one and then the other. If he does it right he can hurt them. They can't hurt him anymore than he has already hurt himself.

Will he do it? Probably not. But if he doesn't, Rudy and John and Mitt have a long uphill fight ahead of them and there's a real possibility that President Bush will hand the keys to the White House over to a Democrat in January 2009 and the keys to the Middle East over to militant Islam.

THE MULLAHS VS. THE FORCES OF NATURE.

Generally speaking, there are three points at which non-consensual (i.e. non-democratic) governments are at their weakest and are thus at the greatest risk of collapse. The first and most obvious of these is when there is a change in leadership. Succession in the absence of a tested mechanism (constitutional provisions, elections, monarchical birth order) is tricky. And the sudden loss of a leader, either by death, incapacitation, insanity, or some other happenstance, can very quickly destabilize a regime.

There is a reason, for example, that official confirmations of the deaths of various Soviet premiers was always delayed by several days, sometimes weeks. Likewise, there is a reason that the Cuban government refuses to be honest in apprising the world of the state of Fidel Castro's health or, as many believe, in informing the world of his demise. Until a successor is officially and comfortably ensconced in power, a non-consensual regime will be unstable, and the risk of its collapse will be quite high. A protracted struggle within the regime over succession carries a considerable risk of far-reaching instability and increases the likelihood that the regime itself will be challenged.

The second point at which such a government is most vulnerable is when its population comes to hold expectations that cannot be met, i.e., when the population believes that that to which it is entitled is being kept or taken from it. This is what social scientists call “relative deprivation” or, more accurately, “perceived relative deprivation,” which was most famously described by political scientist by Ted Robert Gurr. In his 1970 classic *Why Men Rebel*, Gurr explained the concept as “a perceived discrepancy between men’s value expectations and their value capabilities,” and noted that, “societal conditions that increase the average level or intensity of expectations without increasing capabilities increase the intensity of discontent.”

The idea was described in more practical terms by Tocqueville, who wrote, “Patiently endured so long as it seemed beyond redress, a grievance comes to appear intolerable once the possibility of removing it crosses men’s minds.”

The third point of greatest weakness for non-consensual governments is the moment at which the population begins to doubt the regime’s ability or willingness to use the means previously used to stifle dissent. When the people are no longer afraid of the regime, no longer believe that it has the energy or enthusiasm to enforce its will no matter what that entails, then the regime is on precarious footing. Though it might appear to the outside world that “reform” has won the day or that the regime is “moderating,” on the inside, opponents will intuit weakness and opportunity. Once again, Tocqueville put it best:

For it is not always when things are going from bad to worse that revolutions break out. On the contrary, it oftener happens that when an oppressive rule over a long period without protest suddenly finds the government relaxing its pressure, it takes up arms against it . . . experience teaches us that generally speaking, the most perilous moment for a bad government is one when it seeks to mend its ways.

And here again, the Soviet experience provides a buttressing real-world example. In 1956, when the Hungarians overthrew their Russian masters and withdrew from the Warsaw pact, the Soviets responded brutally, slaughtering tens of thousands and making refugees of nearly a quarter million. When all was said and done, Soviet control over central Europe was actually strengthened. Likewise in 1968, the Soviets ended the “Prague Spring” with a Warsaw Pact invasion that was nominally less brutal than the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution but was equally successful in consolidating Soviet control over its satellites.

By the mid 1980s, though, the Soviet Union was well into the latter stages of collapse. Though few on the outside knew this, one person who knew it keenly was former Soviet minister of Agriculture, Mikhail Gorbachev, who had seen firsthand the rot fostered by command-and-control economics. Upon becoming Communist Party Secretary General in 1985, Gorbachev instituted the policies of perestroika (openness) and glasnost (reform) to great exaltation in the West. Of course, within the Soviet Empire, these policies were seen for what they truly were, acknowledgements of weakness and decay.

By 1988, the Baltic Republics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) were agitating for greater autonomy. In the spring of 1989, Solidarity won the Polish parliamentary elections. Later that summer, Hungary removed its border restrictions with Austria, effectively shredding the Iron Curtain. And the Soviets did nothing, in large part because there was nothing that they could do.

By August of 1989, the entire Soviet bloc was crumbling. The Berlin Wall fell in November. The next month, the Velvet Revolution liberated Czechoslovakia from Soviet domination. Within a year, the Warsaw Pact had been dissolved, the Baltic States had declared their independence, and Germany had been reunified. Within two years, the Soviet Union itself had ceased to exist.

Now, we dredge all of this up today because unlike the mainstream press, we are keenly interested in what is going on these days in Iran. Most of what

is reported about Iran deals with either its nuclear weapons program, its potential showdown with the United States, or its clandestine involvement in the Iraqi insurgency. But the real news from the Islamic Republic is the crisis – or crises to be more exact – playing out within its ruling class.

For starters, Iran is currently in the midst of a very heated and potentially very bloody succession struggle. Supreme Leader (and chief Mullah) Ali Khamenei has been seriously ill for some time and is dying. Many observers believe it is unlikely that he will survive the year. The battle to succeed him is already underway and, according to various reports, has already turned bitter and bloody. Two weeks ago, the incomparable Michael Ledeen wrote the following about this war of Persian succession and noted the intensity of the combat.

The supporters of potential successors have begun literally and figuratively fighting each other all over the country. The two main contenders are former President Hashemi Rafsanjani and current President Ahmadinejad [presumably seeking the position for his mentor and spiritual guide Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi] . . .

The succession crisis was already clear some weeks ago. In late January, an open letter to Ahmadinejad attacked Rafsanjani's people — without naming him, but its reference is clear enough — as “arrogantly consider(ing) themselves the sole saviors of the nation's problems,” and trying to sabotage the country's nuclear programs. The letter, written by a former presidential adviser, urged Ahmadinejad to take Rafsanjani to court.

The Rafsanjani crowd struck back: “. . . these days due to the continued aggression of the Islamic Republic with the world powers, the pressure on Iran's economy increases . . . Mr. President . . . you only disempower yourself and your position.”

Rafsanjani has taken extraordinary steps in recent days in an attempt to ensure he will be the next Supreme Leader, despite his lack of standing in the religious community. He went to the holy city of Qom and met with seventeen grand ayatollahs, to whom he said, we can't wait for Khamenei to die before choosing his successor. We have to do it right away. Rafsanjani heads the Committee of Experts that chooses the Supreme Leader, so his pilgrimage to Qom was a preemptive strike to obtain approval for his next move, which is undoubtedly to elect himself. This was confirmed by an equally remarkable appearance on national television on Saturday . . .

Over the past several weeks, a series of attacks have been launched against Iran's Revolutionary Guards, who are allies of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The latest such attack reportedly took place over the weekend, when a military helicopter crashed in Northwest Iran, killing ten Revolutionary Guards, including two commanders. The “official” story suggests that mechanical failures caused the crash, but several reports claim that the helicopter was shot down by SA-7 rockets.

Complicating the succession matter is the perceived impact that the eventual decision on a replacement for Khamenei (and thus a successor to the father of the revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini) will have among the general public. Ahmadinejad is a hardliner and a radical. And he is currently the official head of state. A decision to succeed Khamenei with anyone other than an Ahmadinejad ally may be perceived as a rebuke to the head of state, a rejection of his radicalism. Indeed, Rafsanjani, who is the father of the Islamic Republic's nuclear weapons program, is presenting himself as the moderate alternative to Ahmadinejad and his fellow millenarian cultists. The elevation of Rafsanjani to Supreme leader would, at least in relative terms, be a step back from radicalism.

Moreover, there are at least a couple other “moderates” who may well emerge as possible successors to Khamenei. One is Mahmood Hashemi

Shahroodi, and the other is former president Muhammed Khatami. Additionally, as Ledeen notes, dissident mullah Hosseyanali Montazeri has taken on a greater public role of late. Montazeri, who was an ally of Khomeini's and who was purportedly in line to replace his friend as Supreme Leader, has, over the last several years, become one of the most effective and outspoken critics of the Islamic Republic and has lately turned his energies to criticism of Ahmadinejad and his strain of fundamentalism.

What all of this means is that there is a very real possibility that within the next several months, the Iranian theocracy may take an important step back from its present hard-line positions. It is possible that the "reform" era of the 1990s will be repeated, only this time with some force behind it, in that it will have the backing of the (new) Supreme Leader. And while this will not have much practical effect on Iran's relations with the global community – the Islamic Republic will remain a terrorist sponsor and a threat to the United States and Israel – it may have an interesting and profound psychological effect on the Iranian people.

Relative to this observation, it is worth noting that the battle over succession, serious and deadly though it may be, is hardly the only or even the most serious problem facing the Iranian regime today. Though the Iranian economy remains one of the feeblest and least productive in the world, domestic oil consumption is soaring. Thanks to generous government subsidies, gasoline in Iran costs roughly 40 cents/gallon. But this cannot continue. Iran needs all of its available oil to attempt to maintain exports, which is its only source of income. As we noted last month, the National Academy of Sciences recently published a report written by Roger Stern, a professor of Geography and Environmental Engineering at Johns Hopkins University, detailing the sad state of Iran's oil industry and suggesting that the nation's oil exports could "dry up" in as little as ten years.

What this means domestically in Iran is gasoline rationing and/or the gradual suspension of gas subsidies. Indeed, according to various reports,

Ahadinejad's cabinet has already approved a plan for gas rationing. Some reports suggest that rationing has already begun. A similar plan was passed last summer, but was abandoned before implementation for fear of popular backlash. Now, however, the situation is so dire and the state of the nation's industry is so desperate that rationing can no longer be deferred.

What this means then is that the Iranian people will be suffering not merely from "perceived relative deprivation," but from *real* deprivation. The Iranian economy is pathetic (with both inflation and unemployment soaring) and on top of this, the one commodity that remained cheap will now be available in limited supply or at considerably higher cost. This is, needless to say, hardly a recipe for domestic tranquility.

Indeed, tranquil is among the unlikeliest adjectives one could use to describe the Islamic Republic. What we see in Iran is a totalitarian regime that is facing a successions crisis; one that is quite likely to recoil from its most radical and oppressive postures; and a population that is likely to be beset by deprivation, real and perceived. All of which is to say that over the next several months, the Iranian regime is quite likely to be confronted by all three of the conditions that predispose a country to rebellion or, at the very least, severe domestic instability and disorder.

Does this mean that we are predicting an Iranian revolution (or counter-revolution, if you prefer)? Of course not. As we have written before, predicting revolutions is a fool's errand. Moreover, the entire American intelligence establishment was unable to predict the last Iranian revolution, and it would be presumptuous of two guys working in their basements to believe that they would have much hope of predicting the next one, even presuming that there is a next one.

No. Our purpose here is simply to add a little perspective to the frenzy of speculation about what Iran is doing with regard to its nuclear weapons program and why it is doing so. Last week, the Iranians let slip another deadline imposed by

the United Nations for halting their enrichment of Uranium. Nevertheless, “the international community” (or at least the more naïve portions of it) continues to believe that the regime is softening on the issue and may well be ready to reach an agreement.

Last Friday, *The Washington Post’s* David Ignatius wrote that the Iranians are “circulating” a document that “lists 11 points of understanding supposedly reached last September between Iranian negotiator Ali Larijani and his European counterpart Javier Solana on a temporary, partial, not-quite suspension of uranium enrichment.” Ignatius also quoted Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns as saying that “we’re getting pinged all over the world by Iranians wanting to talk to us” about the uranium enrichment issue.

Also on Friday, *The New York Times* ran a piece by Abbas Milani, the director of Iranian studies at Stanford and a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, who wrote that “After a meeting with the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the leader’s chief foreign policy adviser, Ali Akbar Velayati, declared last week that suspending uranium enrichment is not a red line for the regime — in other words, the mullahs might be ready to agree to some kind of a suspension.” He noted as well that “there have also been indications that the Iranians are willing to accept a compromise plan presented by Mohamed ElBaradei, the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency.”

Now, this may be just another case of the Iranians trying to play both sides of an issue. But if that’s not the case, if there is a real desire at least to appear to be submitting to international pressure, the relevant questions would be “why?” and “what does it mean?”

Ignatius cites “U.S. and European officials” who believe that it “is a sign that their pressure on Tehran [including UN sanctions] is working.” Milani concludes much the same thing, writing that the United Nations Security Council resolution passed in December “hastened the demise of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s confrontational approach to the West.”

This is all well and good. But it’s also hopelessly naïve. The U.N. sanctions are, in our estimation, likely to prove toothless. Already the Europeans, whose trade with Iran tripled between 2001 and 2005, have hinted that they’d like to return to the negotiating table with the Islamic Republic, even before sanctions have had a chance to work. And does anyone really believe that China is willing to forego its exclusive energy deals with the Iranians?

The Mullahs may indeed be pressing the idea of compromise with the global community, but it is not because they fear the United Nations. Rather, it is because their nation is on the verge of chaos. Sanctions and the falling price of oil may be exacerbating factors here, but they are hardly the primary cause.

The idea that Iran is facing some serious and volatile domestic unrest also explains President Bush’s recent decision to “get tough” with the Mullahs after more than four years of doing everything in his power to pretend they didn’t exist. The acknowledgement this month that Iranian government forces are supplying and fighting alongside the insurgents and Iraq and, more to the point, the dispatch of the USS Dwight D Eisenhower carrier group to the Strait of Hormuz suggest that President Bush and his advisors at long last see an opportunity to make headway against the Mullahs. And that opportunity comes courtesy of the succession-induced civil unrest.

The inimitable Amir Taheri, onetime editor of one of the most influential newspapers in Iran, wrote last week that the more aggressive approach taken lately by President Bush is rather likely to fail. Bush’s new “gunboat diplomacy” might have a chance, Taheri wrote, were it not for the fact that the President’s domestic political opposition “would rather see Bush destroyed than the mullahs restrained.” The mullahs understand this, Taheri suggests, which means that “the American gunboat ballet does not impress the radicals in the ascendancy in Tehran.”

Taheri may be right about this. But it is quite possible that the radicals and the mullahs are not the intended recipients of the message sent by this “gunboat

diplomacy.” With the Iranian regime in disarray, domestic opponents are likely to be emboldened simply by the course of events. The presence of the world’s most powerful navy led by the regime’s most virulent enemy in the Strait of Hormuz can only serve to further embolden them.

We don’t want to make the mistake of attributing motives to the Bush administration that we can’t possibly know. And certainly the President has faltered before. Nevertheless, it appears as if there is not only an opportunity to make headway with Iran but that the Bush team realizes it.

Michael Ledeen, who has been one President Bush’s most aggressive critics regarding Iran, suggested last week that it may be true that President Bush has been applying “winning poker to geopolitics” and that he has simply been biding his time waiting for the right chance to “ratchet up the ante against the mullahs.”

We don’t know that we’d go that far. But we do think that the game being played between Bush and the Iranians is one worth watching.

This game might not play out simply, of course. Regimes faced with domestic unrest often lash out internationally. And there is certainly reason to believe that the Iranians are capable of doing so.

Nevertheless, we believe that the dynamic in the American-Iranian relationship might be significantly different than conventional wisdom tells us. The presumption has long been that in this cat-and-mouse game, Iran is the cat, relentlessly pursuing its objectives (regional hegemony) against an irresolute and overwhelmed opponent. Given the state of Iranian domestic affairs, we’re not sure that we buy that anymore. The Iranians may, in fact, be the mouse. At the very least, they are a rather pathetic and sickly cat.

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