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## Why Did Bush Blink on Iran? (Ask Condi)

By Richard Perle

*President George W. Bush's words on Iran have been clear and unmistakable, but the administration's decision to negotiate with the clerics on nuclear energy has weakened the U.S. position and has sent mixed messages to Iranian dissidents who look to the United States for support.*

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran knows what he wants: nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them, suppression of freedom at home and the spread of terrorism abroad, and the “shattering and fall of the ideology and thoughts of the liberal democratic systems.”

President George W. Bush, too, knows what he wants: an irreversible end to Iran's nuclear weapons program, the “expansion of freedom in all the world,” and victory in the war on terrorism.

The State Department and its European counterparts know what they want: negotiations.

For more than five years, the administration has dithered. Bush gave soaring speeches, the Iranians issued extravagant threats, and in 2003, the State Department handed the keys to the impasse to the British, French, and Germans (the “EU-3”), who offered diplomatic valet parking to an administration befuddled by contradiction and indecision. And now, on May 31, the administration offered to join talks with Iran on its nuclear program.

How is it that Bush, who vowed that on his watch “the worst weapons will not fall into the worst hands,” has chosen to beat such an ignominious retreat?

Proximity is critical in politics and policy. And the geography of this administration has changed. Condoleezza Rice has moved from the White House to Foggy Bottom, a mere mile or so away.

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What matters is not that she is further removed from the Oval Office; Rice's influence on the president is undiminished. It is, rather, that she is now in the midst of—and increasingly represents—a diplomatic establishment that is driven to accommodate its allies even when (or, it seems, especially when) such allies counsel the appeasement of our adversaries.

The president knows that the Iranians are undermining us in Iraq. He knows that the mullahs are working to sink any prospect of peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, backing Hamas and its goal of wiping Israel off the map. He knows that for years Iran has concealed and lied about its nuclear weapons program. He knows that Iran leads the world in support for terrorism. And he knows that freedom and liberty in Iran are brutally suppressed.

The president knew all this in 2003 when he learned of Natanz, Arak, and other concealed Iranian nuclear facilities. After the International Atomic Energy Agency became aware of Iran's hidden infrastructure in June of that year, we could have referred the matter to the United Nations Security Council and demanded immediate action. But neither our allies nor our diplomats nor the State Department experts assigned to the White House desired confrontation. It would be better, they argued (as always) to buy time, even though diplomatic time for them was weapons-building time for Iran.

So, after declaring that a nuclear Iran was “unacceptable,” Bush blinked and authorized the EU-3 to approach Tehran with proposals to reward the mullahs if they promised to end their nuclear weapons program.

During these three years, the Iranians have advanced steadily toward acquiring nuclear weapons, defiantly announcing milestones along the way. At the end of May, with Ahmadinejad stridently reiterating Iran’s “right” to enrich the uranium necessary for nuclear weapons, the administration blinked again.

The mullahs do not blink—they glare. In June, the secretary of Iran’s Expediency Council, dismissing the United States as a paper tiger, said, “Something very important is happening. . . . The Americans are no longer saying that Iran must be deprived of its nuclear rights forever. Iran has accomplished a great thing.”

The “great thing” Mohsen Rezaei sees is a weakened U.S. position, with Washington backing away from the brave words of the past and Rice offering to substitute the United States for the EU-3. Recently, Ahmadinejad said that Iran will need nearly three months to respond to our latest offer. (How time flies when you are having fun.)

Twenty years ago, I watched U.S. diplomats conspire with their diffident European counterparts to discourage President Ronald Reagan from a political, economic, and moral assault on the Soviet Union aimed at, well, regime change. Well-meaning diplomats pleaded for flexibility at the negotiating table, hoping to steer U.S. policy back toward détente. But Reagan knew a slippery slope when he saw one. At the defining moments, he refused the advice of the State Department and intelligence community and earned his place in history.

It is not clear whether Bush recognizes the perils of the course he has been persuaded to take. What has been presented to Ahmadinejad as a simple take-it-or-leave-it deal—stop the activities that could enable you to acquire nuclear weapons and we will reward you, or continue them and we will punish you—is nothing of the sort. Neither the activities nor the carrots and sticks are clearly defined or settled with our allies, much less with Russia and China. If the punishments require approval by the UN Security Council, the United States would need an unlikely combination of approvals and abstentions from council members. The new policy, undoubtedly pitched to the president as a means of enticing the EU-3 to support ending Iran’s program, is likely to diminish pressure on Iran and allow the mullahs more time to develop the weapons they have paid dearly to pursue.

## Support for Iranian Dissidents

No U.S. administration since 1979 has had a serious political strategy regarding Iran. That has been especially evident in the past decade, when the bloom was off the rose of the Islamic revolution, the Revolutionary Guard joined the baby boomers in middle age, and the Islamic republic sank into political, economic, and social decline. Opponents of the regime have been calling for a referendum on whether to continue as an Islamic theocracy or join the world of modern, secular democracies. They are sure of the outcome.

The failure of successive U.S. administrations, including this one, to give moral and political support to the regime’s opponents is a tragedy. Iran is a country of young people, most of whom wish to live in freedom and admire the liberal democracies that Ahmadinejad loathes and fears. The brave men and women among them need, want, and deserve our support. They reject the jaundiced view of tired bureaucrats who believe that their cause is hopeless or that U.S. support will worsen their situation.

In his second inaugural address, Bush said, “All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: The United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for liberty, we will stand with you.”

Iranians were heartened by those words, much as the dissidents of the Soviet Union were heartened by Reagan’s “evil empire” speech in 1983. Recently, I spoke with Amir Abbas Fakhraei, an Iranian dissident student leader who escaped first from Tehran’s notorious Evin Prison, then, after months in hiding, from Iran.

Fakhraei heard this president’s words, and he took them to heart. But now, as he pleads for help for his fellow citizens, he is apprehensive. He wonders whether the administration’s new approach to the mullahs will silence the president’s voice, whether the proponents of accommodation with Tehran will regard the struggle for freedom in Iran as an obstacle to their new diplomacy.

In June, Senator Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) tried to pass the Iran Freedom Support Act, which would have increased the administration’s too-little-too-late support for democracy and human rights in Iran. But the State Department opposed it, arguing that it “runs counter to our efforts . . . it would limit our diplomatic flexibility.”

I hope it is not too late for Fakhraei and his friends. I know it is not too late for us, not too late to give substance to Bush’s words, not too late to redeem our honor.