

THE COST OF STOPPING IRAN

By RALPH PETERS

'WASHINGTON joined the rest of the world in criticizing yesterday's detonation of a nuclear weapon by Iran, but America's reaction appeared half-hearted to European allies who suspect the U.S. of tacit support for the shah's pet program.

" 'It's pure hypocrisy,' a European Union spokesperson declared. 'How can Washington denounce Tehran's bomb in one breath, then add that it understands the shah's concerns about remaining defenseless in a nuclear neighborhood? Could Iran have developed this weapon without U.S. complicity? The Americans have been the dominant presence in Iran for over 50 years, since the era of this shah's father.' "

Of course, there is no shah on a Peacock Throne now, and the United States stands outside of Iran's borders looking in (a bit too closely for Tehran's comfort these days). But it can be helpful, if uncomfortable, to consider how different our reaction to an Iranian nuclear capability might be had the 1979 revolution failed. Would we be one-tenth as determined to prevent "our man in Tehran" from pursuing nuclear weapons?

This matters, since an issue that seems obvious to us — the mullahs must not get their hands on nukes — can look very different from a foreign perspective. Almost unbearably proud, the Persians at the core of Iranian society find it insulting to be treated as less worthy than Indians or even Pakistanis (regarded by Persians as barely civilized).

Meanwhile, our government negotiates with New Delhi over the transfer of advanced nuclear technology to India — which is emerging as a crucial ally. We remain uncomfortable with Islamabad's nuclear arsenal, yet we've managed to overlook it in the greater interest (to us) of pursuing the Long War, aka the Global War on Terror. Given its blind commitment to Riyadh, the Clinton administration even suppressed field reports of Saudi backing for Pakistan's nuclear program in the mid-'90s.

If you sat in the halls of power in Tehran, how seriously would you take Washington's commitment to nonproliferation? As for Europe, when faced with the Last Judgment, the continent's leaders will call for further negotiations with Lucifer and threaten God with sanctions.

And we now know that those sanctions do not work. Period. They may mildly inconvenience foreign leaders and their cronies who are denied shopping and whore-chasing trips to Paris or London, but *all* sanction regimes have been so porous that the well-connected continue to live well while the common people

suffer — with their pains artfully aggravated by their governments to intensify popular ire against the West.

As for a military option against Iran's nuclear facilities, it remains a possibility — perhaps ultimately a necessity — but those pundits calling blithely for air-strikes have no conception of how intense and difficult a campaign would be required. The Iranians learned from the fate of Saddam Hussein's nuclear project: Tehran's program is hidden, hardened and human-shielded.

The Iranians dispersed their facilities, concealed whatever they could, went underground where possible — and have made sure that their key sites are populated not only by Iranians but also by foreign advisers (not least Russians). A serious bombing campaign could take weeks, requiring detailed post-strike damage assessments and follow-on missions. Casualties would include third-party nationals — and Tehran would not be above creating additional casualties to excite domestic rage and global sympathy.

If Washington and its allies decide that the military option is unavoidable, will the campaign fail in the face of opposition from the media? Would it be interrupted as tragically as the First Battle of Fallujah, resulting in the strengthening of our enemies? Could we stick it through to the end if thousands of Iranians were killed, while the Kremlin rattled its rusty saber and China aligned against us?

The point of these arguments is not to advance the Iranian cause. Tehran must not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons. But we need less bilious rhetoric and more incisive, honest thought. We may agree that it's essential to block Iran's religious fascists from acquiring nukes, but doing something about it is just plain hard. And we cannot afford a replay of previous adventures in which the vessels carrying our good intentions broke up on the shoals of a reality more complex than we had acknowledged.

Even if the international community agrees on sanctions, they won't work. Sanctions would only unite Iran's key population groups while giving the mullahs the gift of several years — perhaps a decade or more — to pursue their nuclear ambitions. A military option looks increasingly like the best of the bad choices facing us.

Yet, even were a bombing campaign to succeed — despite the inevitable global anger — Washington would face a different setback. The paradox of Iran is that, if we can avoid a violent clash, no other country between Israel and India is as likely to become a firm American ally in future decades (once the theocracy falls, as it finally will).

A terrible American weakness is our belief that the world is simple and that obvious solutions are out there waiting for us to discover them. Not only isn't the international situation black and white — sometimes there are no good solutions

at all. We expect perfect results in an adamantly imperfect world. And we are consistently disappointed.

In the real world in which we live, the best outcomes are flawed. Sometimes, you must expend blood and treasure merely for transient advantage: to gain time, not a decisive triumph. It's another paradox that, in this great age of America's unprecedented power, our level of strategic thought is less sophisticated than it was in the Lincoln White House — to say nothing of the under-appreciated Eisenhower presidency.

We speak before we think, act before we analyze, and pretend the world is as we wish it to be.

Iran *must* be prevented from gaining nuclear weapons. But how high a price are *you* willing to pay to achieve that goal?

This time, let's be honest about the costs.

Ralph Peters' latest book is "New Glory: Expanding America's Global Supremacy."