

Let's undo the concessions to Iran

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by Jed Babbin



Let it be said once and with precision: whether George W. Bush recovers his political clout is much less important than many other problems we face. Those who are charting paths for his recovery are just reprocessing the conservative principles that the president has spent the last six years rejecting.

The most important issue of our time is the war against terrorists and the nations that support them. Some, such as Sen. Richard Lugar (R-IN), fear that the president will lose control of the war if he cannot devise a bipartisan strategy for Iraq between now and September when Gen.

David Petraeus reports to Congress. But the president lost control of the war four years ago when he decided to undertake the neocon nation-building of Iraq and thus gave control of the pace and direction of the war to our adversaries: Iran, Syria and Saudi Arabia which have funded, armed and manned the insurgency from its beginning. Iran's regime -- fanatic and theocratic -- is by far the greatest danger.

There are those such as former Secretary of State James Baker and future-former Secretary of State Rice who believe that by negotiating with the Iranians we can talk them out of their nuclear ambitions and into helping stabilize Iraq. When challenged, negotiation devotees cannot identify one single instance where negotiations have succeeded in changing the Iranian regime's behavior. There is none such.

On "Kudlow and Company" last Friday I challenged retired Gen. Wesley Clark to name one single instance in which negotiations had worked with Iran. He couldn't, of course. When Clark and the rest of these latter-day Neville Chamberlains argue for negotiations with Iran, their arguments are defeated by the evidence of the regime's history, including its reaction to the most recent spate of American begging (Rice to Iran, to join the Iraq "talks.") In response to the invitation, the Iranians grudgingly attended, declined to agree to anything and then trumped up charges and imprisoned three Iranian-American women and one Iranian-American man. Weakness is provocative.

There are things we can do short of war to weaken the ayatollahs and to demonstrate to the Iranian people that though the regime is our enemy, the people are not. We need an energetic and focused strategy to bring about regime change in Iran. The military options (which are many, not few) are for another day. The diplomatic strategy begins -- as always -- with behavioral modification at Foggy Bottom.

Since 1979, the mullahs have controlled the diplomatic and geopolitical game. Every Iranian provocation has been met with inaction or further concessions by the US and its allies. Our concessions have bought us nothing. To weaken the Iranian regime, we can begin by taking back the concessions to regain control of the geopolitical equation in the Middle East.

Some of the concessions -- such as the Clinton administration's May 1998 waiver of sanctions against the Indonesian oil company, Petronas, for operating in Iran -- will cause diplomatic difficulties. Others, such as the Bush administration's authorization of the EU-3 offer of spare parts for aircraft as a carrot in the repeatedly-failed nuclear negotiation with Iran and others -- including the most important -- can be done with the stroke of a pen.

In March 2005, President Bush agreed to not oppose Iran's entry into the WTO. Iran's membership has been delayed. Now it should be blocked entirely.

In March 2000, the Clinton State Department stopped calling Iran a "rogue state." Iran's regime should never be mentioned without the terms "rogue" or "terrorist" being appended. That same month the Clintons removed trade barriers to Iranian caviar, pistachios and carpets. We can, if we struggle mightily, get on with our lives without Iranian fish eggs, nuts and the carpets to sit on while eating them.

In April 1999, the State Department stopped designating Iran as a "leading" state sponsor of terrorism. The designation should be restored. A year earlier, Iran's listing as a major producer of narcotics was dropped. That, too, should be restored and all of the resulting legal consequences enforced.

In 1997, the Clintons made two huge concessions to Iran. First was dropping the sanctions we threatened against Turkey for using an Iranian pipeline to transport gas from Turkmenistan. Turkey, once a strong US ally and cornerstone of NATO, is drifting into the Islamist circle. Proving forcefully our opposition to Iran's influence will slow or reverse that drift. Recouping the second concession will require divesting the appeasers of control of our diplomacy.

In October 1997 -- at the request of the ayatollahs -- we added the Mujahedeen-e Khalk to the list of foreign terrorist organizations. Think about that: we declared the MEK terrorists to appease the most powerful terrorists in the world. One Clinton administration official said at the time that, "... inclusion of the MEK [on the terrorist list] was intended as a goodwill gesture to Tehran." Would we have designated the French maquisards "terrorists" had Hitler asked?

The MEK (also known as the People's Mujahedeen Organization of Iran or PMOI) is a Iranian nationalist group which existed before the fall of the Shah in 1979. It was nominally Marxist, and now appears to be the only Iranian opposition group that has a significant following in Iran, or the capability for action.

The MEK -- having fled the mullahs -- had taken refuge in Iraq and been supported by Saddam as a force against Iran's regime. In 2003, we bombed MEK positions and disarmed them. About 3800 MEK members -- including its leader, Massoud Rajavi -- are still in Camp Ashraf north of Baghdad. According to a July 21, 2004 letter to "the people of Ashraf", Gen. Geoffrey Miller -- then deputy commanding general of Coalition forces in Iraq -- informed MEK members that they were "protected persons" under the Geneva Conventions which, by definition, means they are not terrorists. (A sixteen-month investigation of MEK found no basis to charge any of its members with violations of American law).

In my new book, "In the Words of Our Enemies," I excerpt some of the speeches of Ahmadinejad's boss -- Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. When Khamenei speaks, the crowd is required to chant, "Death to America. Death to England. Death to the Mujahedeen-e Khalk." The mullahs fear the MEK as much or more than they fear us.

In November 2004, the EU-3 (Germany, France and Britain) signed an agreement with Iran on its nuclear program. Part of it said, "Irrespective of progress on the nuclear use, E3/EU and Iran confirm their determination to combat terrorism, including the activities of Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups such as MEK." There is no progress on the nuclear issue, and Iran has only increased its support of terrorists. The EU, and we, remain intimidated by Iran and keep the MEK on the terrorist list.

When the EU courts recently ruled that listing the MEK as a terrorist organization was wrongful, the Iranian regime called many of the EU ministers to threaten them if the MEK was taken off the list. The EU ministers have, so far, defied their own courts.

Let us assume for the sake of argument that everything bad that has been said about the MEK is true. So what if it were? If we are to remove the threat of the Iranian regime, we are not going to recruit the people we need to help us do so from the members of the Vienna Boys' Choir. The Iranian regime is that afraid of the MEK. Why should we be afraid of using them to interfere with the most dangerous terrorists of all?

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