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Bombs That Would Backfire

By **RICHARD CLARKE** and **STEVEN SIMON**

04/17/06 "New York Times" -- -- WHITE HOUSE spokesmen have played down press reports that the Pentagon has accelerated planning to bomb Iran. We would like to believe that the administration is not intent on starting another war, because a conflict with Iran could be even more damaging to our interests than the current struggle in Iraq has been. A brief look at history shows why.

Reports by the journalist Seymour Hersh and others suggest that the United States is contemplating bombing a dozen or more nuclear sites, many of them buried, around Iran. In the event, scores of air bases, radar installations and land missiles would also be hit to suppress air defenses. Navy bases and coastal missile sites would be struck to prevent Iranian retaliation against the American fleet and Persian Gulf shipping. Iran's long-range missile installations could also be targets of the initial American air campaign.

These contingencies seem familiar to us because we faced a similar situation as National Security Council staff members in the mid-1990's. American frustrations with Iran were growing, and in early 1996 the House speaker, Newt Gingrich, publicly called for the overthrow of the Iranian government. He and the C.I.A. put together an \$18 million package to undertake it.

The Iranian legislature responded with a \$20 million initiative for its intelligence organizations to counter American influence in the region. Iranian agents began casing American embassies and other targets around the world. In June 1996, the Qods Force, the covert-action arm of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, arranged the bombing of an apartment building used by our Air Force in Khobar, Saudi Arabia, killing 19 Americans.

At that point, the Clinton administration and the Pentagon considered a bombing campaign. But after long debate, the highest levels of the military could not forecast a way in which things would end favorably for the United States.

While the full scope of what America did do remains classified, published reports suggest that the United States responded with a chilling threat to the Tehran government and conducted a global operation that immobilized Iran's intelligence service. Iranian terrorism against the United States ceased.

In essence, both sides looked down the road of conflict and chose to avoid further hostilities. And then the election of the reformist Mohammad Khatami as president of Iran in 1997 gave Washington and Tehran the cover they needed to walk back from the precipice.

Now, as in the mid-90's, any United States bombing campaign would simply begin a multi-move, escalatory process. Iran could respond three ways. First, it could attack Persian Gulf oil facilities and tankers — as it did in the mid-1980's — which could cause oil prices to spike above \$80 dollars a barrel.

Second and more likely, Iran could use its terrorist network to strike American targets around the world, including inside the United States. Iran has forces at its command that are far superior to anything Al Qaeda was ever able to field. The Lebanese terrorist organization Hezbollah has a global reach, and has served in the past as an instrument of Iran. We might hope that Hezbollah, now a political party, would decide that it has too much to lose by joining a war against the United States. But this would be a dangerous bet.

Third, Iran is in a position to make our situation in Iraq far more difficult than it already is. The Badr Brigade and other Shiite militias in Iraq could launch a more deadly campaign against British and American troops. There is every reason to believe that Iran has such a retaliatory shock wave planned and ready.

No matter how Iran responded, the question that would face American planners would be, "What's our next move?" How do we achieve so-called escalation dominance, the condition in which the other side fears responding because they know that the next round of American attacks would be too lethal for the regime to survive?

Bloodied by Iranian retaliation, President Bush would most likely authorize wider and more intensive bombing. Non-military Iranian government targets would probably be struck in a vain hope that the Iranian people would seize the opportunity to overthrow the government. More likely, the American war against Iran would guarantee the regime decades more of control.

So how would bombing Iran serve American interests? In over a decade of looking at the question, no one has ever been able to provide a persuasive answer. The president assures us he will seek a diplomatic solution to the Iranian crisis. And there is a role for threats of force to back up diplomacy and help concentrate the

minds of our allies. But the current level of activity in the Pentagon suggests more than just standard contingency planning or tactical saber-rattling.

The parallels to the run-up to war with Iraq are all too striking: remember that in May 2002 President Bush declared that there was "no war plan on my desk" despite having actually spent months working on detailed plans for the Iraq invasion. Congress did not ask the hard questions then. It must not permit the administration to launch another war whose outcome cannot be known, or worse, known all too well.

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