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Who the Hell Knows?

How Far is Iran from the Bomb?

By **RAY McGOVERN**

Former CIA analyst

That was one of the key questions asked of newly confirmed Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell at a Senate Armed Forces Committee hearing on Tuesday. Why had McConnell avoided this front-burner issue in his prepared remarks? Because an honest answer would have been: "Beats the hell out of us. Despite the billions that American taxpayers have sunk into improving U.S. intelligence, we can only guess."

But the question is certainly a fair, and urgent one. A mere three weeks into the job, McConnell can perhaps be forgiven for merely reciting the hazy forecast of his predecessor, John Negroponte, and using the obscurantist jargon that has been introduced into key national intelligence estimates (NIEs) in recent years. McConnell had these two sentences committed to memory: "We assess that Iran seeks to develop a nuclear weapon. The information is incomplete, but we assess that Iran could develop a nuclear weapon early-to-mid-next decade."

At that point McConnell received gratuitous reinforcement from Lt. Gen. Michael Maples, head of the Defense Intelligence Agency. With something of a flourish, Maples bragged that it was "with high confidence" that DIA "assesses that Iran remains determined to develop nuclear weapons."

After the judgments in the Oct. 1, 2002 NIE assessing weapons-of-mass-destruction in Iraq—judgments stated with "high confidence"—turned out to be wrong, National Intelligence Council officials decided to fine-tune the word "assess" to cover their asses. The council took the unusual step of including a short glossary in its recent NIE on Iraq:

"When we use words such as "we assess," we are trying to convey an analytical

assessment or judgment. These assessments, which are based on incomplete or at times fragmentary information are not a fact, proof, or knowledge. Some analytical judgments are based directly on collected information; others rest on previous judgments, which serve as building blocks. In either type of judgment, we do not have "evidence" that shows something to be a fact."

So *caveat emptor*. Beware the verisimilitude conveyed by "we assess." It can have a lemming effect, as evidenced Tuesday by the automatic head bobbing that greeted Sen. Lindsay Graham's (R, SC) clever courtroom-style summary argument at the hearing, "We all agree, then, that the Iranians are trying to get nuclear weapons."

Quick, someone, please give Sen. Graham the National Intelligence Council's new glossary.

Shoddy Record on Iran

Iran is a difficult intelligence target. Understood. Even so, U.S. intelligence performance "assessing" Iran's progress toward a nuclear capability does not inspire confidence. The only quasi-virtue readily observable in the string of intelligence estimates is the kind of foolish consistency that Emerson called "the hobgoblin of little minds." In 1995 U.S. intelligence started consistently "assessing" that Iran was "within five years" of reaching a nuclear weapons capability. But, year after year that got a little old and tired...and even embarrassing. So in 2005, when the most recent NIE was issued (and then leaked to the *Washington Post*), the timeline was extended and given still more margin for error. Basically, it was moved ten years out to 2015 but, in a fit of nervous caution, the estimators created the expression "early-to-mid-next decade."

Small wonder that the commission picked by President George W. Bush to investigate the intelligence community's performance on weapons of mass destruction complained that U.S. intelligence knows "disturbingly little" about Iran. Shortly after the most recent estimate was completed in June 2005, Robert G. Joseph, the neo-conservative who succeeded John Bolton as undersecretary of state for arms control, was asked whether Iran had a nuclear effort under way. He replied: "I don't know quite how to answer that because we don't have perfect information or perfect understanding. But the Iranian record, plus what the Iranian leaders have said...lead us to conclude that we have to be highly skeptical."

Is help on the way? A fresh national intelligence estimate on Iran has been in preparation for several months—far too leisurely a pace in present circumstances. Will it have any appreciable effect in informing policy? Don't count on it.

One would have thought that President Bush would await those intelligence findings before sending two aircraft carrier strike groups to the Persian Gulf area

and dispatching Vice President Dick Cheney to help throw a scare into folks in Asia. But it is not at all uncommon in this faith-based administration for the intelligence to lag critical decisions; indeed, it is the preferred *modus operandi* of the Cheney-Bush team and the self-licking ice cream cone that passes for its advisers.

After all, the decision to attack Iraq was made many months before "intelligence" (culminating in the fraudulent NIE of Oct. 1, 2002) was ginned up to support that chosen course. The decision to send 21,500 additional troops into Iraq predated the publication of the latest NIE on Iraq. And Defense Secretary Robert Gates, while quickly signing up to act as surge protector, pretended to be "unaware" of the completed NIE draft, when his patron, Sen. John Warner (R, VA) asked the former CIA director about it on Jan. 12 before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Against this background, Tuesday's Senate Armed Forces Committee hearing and the parsing of intelligence on Iran seemed almost divorced from reality—not relevant to the "new history" that Bush's neo-conservative advisers say they are striving to create. Committee chair Carl Levin (D, Mich) ran the hearing well, however, and the committee homed in on some key issues, should there be any policymakers willing to listen.

The Good News: There's Time

If anything leaps out of all this, it is that there is time to address, in a sensible way, whatever concerns may be driving Iran to seek nuclear weapons—Cheney's two-year old claim of a "fairly robust new nuclear program" in Iran, his blustering, and his itchy trigger finger notwithstanding.

A year and a half after the 2005 estimate that concluded Iran was five to ten years away from building a nuclear weapon, *NPR's* Robert Siegel did the math and decided to follow up with Negroponte. Drawing from Negroponte's own words the year before (NIEs are formal documents signed by the director of national intelligence), Siegel asked him whether he still thought Iran could have a nuclear weapon "sometime between four and ten years from now." "Five to ten years from now," Negroponte answered, barely suppressing a smirk betraying his own disdain for the five-years-away-every-year intelligence record on Iran.

A Radical Idea

Negroponte then gingerly raised the possibility—avoided like the plague by neo-conservatives in good standing—that diplomacy might help. A diplomat by profession, with the benighted idea view that talking with adversaries can be helpful, he may have thought he would be forgiven for breaking ranks and raising

the possibility of talks. (He was not forgiven. Rather, he found himself demoted and sent back to the State Department a few months later.) Here is Negroponte's radical idea:

"I think that the pace of Iran's program gives us time, and international diplomacy can work."

Asked by Siegel to explain why the Israelis have suggested a much shorter timeline for Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon, Negroponte stated the obvious—this time with undiplomatic bluntness: "I think that sometimes what the Israelis will do [is] give you the worst-case assessment." Ironically, it was McConnell who chose the more diplomatic path at Tuesday's hearing, when Sen. Graham asked him the same question; i.e., did he know why the Israelis had a different view? McConnell did a good job of appearing puzzled (hopefully, it was just an act), noting that U.S. and Israelis work from the same information and share intelligence.

Why Tehran Wants Nukes: Did Someone Say Deterrence?

In his introductory remarks Armed Forces Committee Chair Levin said he hoped the discussion would address "the circumstances in which Iran might give up its nuclear [weapons] plans." Assuming Iran has such plans, or at least intends to leave that option open for later decision when it has mastered the enrichment process, it makes sense to try to figure out what drives Tehran to that course.

McConnell Tuesday chose to adopt Negroponte's refreshingly candid approach to this key issue and reject the cry-wolf rhetoric of Cheney and the neo-cons that Iran's ultimate aim must be to destroy Israel. McConnell noted that Iran would like to dominate the Gulf region and deter potential adversaries; that an integral part of Iran's strategy is to deter and, if necessary, retaliate against forces in the region—including U.S. forces. Similarly, he indicated that Tehran considers its ability to conduct terrorist operations abroad a key element of its determination to protect Iran by deterring U.S. or Israeli attacks. These sentiments dovetail with those offered by Defense Secretary Gates at his confirmation hearing on December 5: "While they [the Iranians] are certainly pressing, in my opinion, for a nuclear capability, I think they would see it in the first instance as a deterrent. They are surrounded by powers with nuclear weapons—Pakistan to their east, the Russians to the north, the Israelis to the west, and us in the Persian Gulf."

Deterrence? Both Sen. Levin and ranking member John Warner (R, VA) picked up on this, to the dismay of Sen. Graham, who sounded as if he had just come from a briefing by the Israeli extreme right who, with Cheney, are pushing hard for a U.S. strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. Graham said he thought economic sanctions might work but that, in any case, they were "the only thing left short of military action."

The sloppy logic of the syllogism offered by the senior senator from South Carolina is nothing short of bizarre, particularly coming from someone who prides

himself on being a lawyer:

Major premise: Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has denied the Holocaust.

Minor premise: If Iran got a nuclear weapon, it would launch it at Israel.

Conclusion: Iran should be attacked, if sanctions do not bring the Iranians to heel.

Seldom have I heard an American senator so openly press the U.S. to mount an attack on a major country simply because it could be perceived as a possible threat to Israel. There was no mention of Israel's own arsenal of some 200-300 nuclear weapons and multiple delivery systems. Nor did anyone allude to French President Jacques Chirac's recent comment that, with one or two nuclear weapons Iran would pose no big danger, because launching a nuclear weapon against Israel would inevitably bring the destruction of Tehran.

Sen. Warner objected strongly to the notion that, if sanctions against Iran failed, the next step had to be military action. With support from Levin, Warner alluded time and time again to the effectiveness of mutual deterrence after WWII, stressing that deterrence is a far better course than to let slip the dogs of war. He referred to the role he played in ensuring that the Soviet Union was deterred. It seemed as though he was about to cry out from exasperation, Why don't we talk to the Iranians...like I talked to the Russians? But, typically for Warner, he elected in the end to hew to the party line and avoid the forbidden subject of possibly talking with "bad guys."

Better To Jaw-Jaw Than War-War

But did you notice? While Cheney was abroad last week, others persuaded the president to send representatives later this month to a conference in Baghdad, in which representatives of Syria and Iran will also participate to discuss the situation in Iraq. In addition, foreign ministers of the same countries plan to meet in early April. This sharp departure in policy tends to confirm the guidance in internal administration memos regarding how to influence the president. In his *One Percent Doctrine*, Ron Suskind quotes one such memo: "The last verbal briefing on a particular issue will carry the day."

If Cheney does not sabotage such talks now that he's back home, they could lead to direct negotiations with Iran on the nuclear question. It makes no sense at all to refuse to talk with Iran, which has as many historical grievances against the U.S. as vice versa. (Someone please tell that to the president.) With Cheney playing the heavy, it has not been possible to penetrate the Praetorian Guard for candid discussions with the president. The sooner that can be done the better. Hurry! Before Cheney has time to scoot little Libbys out on pre-emptive errands.

The ultimate aim, in my view, should be a Middle East free of nuclear weapons.

That would have the best chance of stopping whatever plans the Iranians and others have to develop nuclear weapons. And please do not tell me that, because Israel would not agree, we cannot move in this direction. It is time to override the Israeli veto—for the Israelis' own sake. The U.S. and other Israel supporters can provide the necessary guarantees of the security of Israel. What has become increasingly clear is that Israeli intransigence on this issue is not a viable middle- or long-term strategy serving Israel's own interest—not to mention the interests of justice and peace in the region.

Forgive me for mentioning the quaint idea of justice and peace. But THAT is the side America should be on.

Ray McGovern works with *Tell the Word*, the publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC. He chaired National Intelligence Estimates and also prepared and briefed The President's Daily Brief while a CIA analyst from 1963 to 1990. He now serves on the Steering Group of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) and can be reached at: rrmcgovern@aol.com

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