

What If Iran Already Has The Bomb?

Defense Secretary Gates reassured America, watching Sunday TV talk shows on Father's Day, that there is still time for sanctions to compel Iran to abandon pursuit of an "Islamic Bomb." U.S. policy toward Iran is founded on the assessment, unquestioned by anyone in the press, that Iran does not yet have nuclear weapons.

Yet there are good reasons for questioning this premise, so fundamental to our policy, that Iran is still a non-nuclear weapons state.

That Iran has not conducted a nuclear test is no guarantee they do not have the bomb. The United States did not test the A-bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. The U.S. Trinity atomic test was of a more complex bomb design, that was used to destroy Nagasaki. Today, the U.S. maintains its sophisticated thermonuclear deterrent without testing. Our own experience proves that Iran need not conduct a nuclear test in order to have nuclear weapons..

Intelligence on Iran's nuclear program is not good. Iran's nuclear program is hidden from scrutiny, in secure underground facilities. Where all of these facilities are located, and what they are doing, is unknown.

The IAEA, the United Nations "nuclear watchdog," is dependent for what it knows upon Iran's voluntary cooperation. Nor was the last chief of the IAEA, Mohamed ElBaradei, on whose watch most of what we know about Iran's nuclear program was collected, a fan of the United States or an enthusiast for aggressive action to stop Iran's march toward the bomb. We now know that ElBaradei, while IAEA chief, had aspirations to run for president of his native country, Egypt, where the notion of an "Islamic Bomb" is popular on the Arab street, and where sanctions or military actions against Muslim countries is anathema.

The IAEA is a notoriously poor "watchdog." Prior to the first Persian Gulf war, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein pursued a clandestine nuclear weapons program to within months of developing an atomic bomb, right under the noses of the IAEA. Only Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, and Iraq's crushing defeat, resulted in the discovery and dismantlement of Saddam's version of the Manhattan Project.

Nor has the U.S. intelligence community covered itself with glory in providing warning of nuclear threats. Although U.S. intelligence agencies are faulted mostly for overestimating Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program prior to the second Persian Gulf war, historically, U.S. intelligence tends to underestimate nuclear threats. For example, the U.S. was surprised by the Soviet A-bomb test in 1949, surprised when the USSR tested the first weaponized H-bomb in 1953, surprised by the discovery of Saddam's near development of the A-bomb in 1991, surprised by Pakistan's and India's nuclear tests in 1999, and wrong that Iran stopped its nuclear weapons program temporarily in 2003. The bias in the U.S. intelligence community is to underestimate threats, not overestimate them, because Presidents don't like to hear bad news. Presidents like to think that they still have time to negotiate away an existential threat.

History suggests that we may already be too late to stop Iran's "Islamic Bomb." The U.S. Manhattan Project, when the A-bomb was merely a theoretical possibility, and using 1940s era technology, secretly produced two atomic bombs, of radically different designs--*in only three years*. Moreover, during those three years the U.S. secretly developed the vast industrial nuclear weapons infrastructure that quickly built hundreds of bombs during the early Cold War.

Israel is credited with developing a large and highly sophisticated nuclear arsenal clandestinely, all without nuclear testing. We know from Mordecai Vanunu, who defected from Israel's nuclear weapons program, and according to the respected Wisconsin Project, Israel has hundreds of nuclear weapons, including neutron and thermonuclear warheads. Yet Israel has a population only the size of Baltimore, and lacks the oil wealth of Iran.

Why do we suppose that Iran cannot accomplish in 20 years of trying, with access to vast amounts of unclassified data on nuclear weapons design and equipped with 21st Century technology, what the U.S. accomplished in three years during the 1940s? Why do we suppose that Iran, with resources vastly superior to Israel, and helped by Russia, China, and North Korea, cannot match or surpass Israel's nuclear weapons feat?

Why does Iran, with its provocative attitude toward the U.S. and the entire world, act like a nuclear weapons state?

Iran only needs a single nuclear weapon to destroy the United States. A nuclear EMP (electromagnetic pulse) attack could collapse the national electric grid and other critical infrastructures that sustain the lives of 310 million Americans. Iran writes about EMP attack and appears to practice EMP missile strikes. Last year, Iran orbited a small satellite, along a trajectory that could have placed an EMP field over the entire contiguous United States, were the satellite a small nuclear or "Super-EMP" weapon.

We had better be right that Iran does not yet have the bomb.

Dr. Peter Vincent Pry is President of EMPact America, Director of the Nuclear Strategy Forum, and served on the staffs of the Strategic Posture Commission, the EMP Commission, the House Armed Services Committee, and the CIA.