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Commentary: The dangers of unintended consequences

By Arnaud de Borchgrave

UPI Editor at Large

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WASHINGTON -- While Condoleezza Rice said this was not the time to try and come to a conclusion about what the next step on Iran's nuclear defiance might be, those who assured us Operation Iraqi Freedom would be a walk in the park are now telling us Operation Silence Mullahs would be casualty-free -- at least for the good guys.

A prominent "neocon," still in good odor at the White House and OSD (Office of the Secretary of Defense), speaking privately, assured us that by the time president Bush leaves office in January 2009, Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions would be history.

Assuming tough sanctions -- draconian or otherwise -- don't bring Iran's mullahs to heel, we inquired, trying not to sound too wimpish, what would be Mr. Bush's next step?

"B-2s," this prominent armchair strategist replied. "Two of them could do the job in a single strike against multiple targets." With a crew of two per bomber, only four American lives would be at risk, an all-time record in the history of warfare.

So we looked up B-2s. The U.S. Air Force only has 21 of them. Perhaps price had something to do with it. They came in at \$2.2 billion a copy. But they can carry enough ordnance to make Iranians nostalgic for the Shah and his role as the free world's gendarme in charge of the West's oil supplies in the Gulf. These stealthy bombers have one major drawback in the Persian magic carpet mode. They can only attack 16 targets simultaneously; one short of the 17 underground nuclear facilities pinned red on Mossad's target-rich PowerPoint presentations to the political leadership. Presumably, that's why two B-2s would be required.

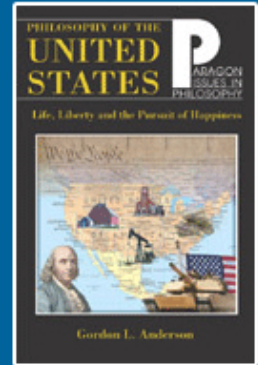
For the cognoscente, the B-2's payload offers a rich and varied menu of seriously harmful goodies/nasties. Either the multi-billion-dollar bomber can carry 34 CBU's (laser-guided Cluster Bomb Units), or 16 JDAMs (Joint Direct Attack Munition), or 8 BLU-28s (daisy-cutting, satellite-guided bunker-busters), or 16 JSOW (Joint Standoff Weapon), or 16 JASSM (Joint Air to Surface Standoff Missile). Whatever the option selected for Iran, it would be 40,000 pounds of explosives delivered with a standoff capability, or about 15 miles from the target.

Most of Iran's secret nuclear installations are not only underground, but also close to population centers. The first pictures of a B-2 raid would be dead women and children on al-Jazeera television newscasts, now as globally ubiquitous as CNN and FOX. The collateral damage would then rival Abu Ghraib's devastating impact on America's good name. The perceived American indifference over the loss of Arab lives would now be seen as spreading to another Muslim country.

At almost half a trillion dollars by year's end, the Iraqi "cakewalk" turned out to be (thus far) a costly boondoggle, which translated into a gain for Chinese and Russian influence on the global chessboard and a corresponding loss of U.S. influence. While we continue to dig a deeper hole in Iraq, China cuts deals to dig

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The neocon informant says there is "absolutely no way" Bush will accommodate to an Iranian nuke or two, the way he blinked first with North Korea. His uncompromising view of the Iranian nuclear danger and his determination to prevent it by force of two B-2s if necessary is "as solid as his resolve to rid Iraq of Saddam Hussein."

This is also the British assessment of Bush's intentions against Iran, a power whose president has vowed to wipe Israel off the map. Today, senior British officials met with defense and intelligence chiefs to assess the consequences of air strikes against Iran -- as well as European and global repercussions.

Neocons are unfazed by the fact that Iran is an ancient civilization of 70 million people with retaliatory assets that range from a choke-hold on the world's most important oil route in the Strait of Hormuz, to an anti-U.S. Shiite coalition in Iraq with two private militias, funded and armed by Iran, to terrorist groups throughout the Middle East that have a global reach. Iran is also a power that not only resisted an Iraqi invasion, but fought Saddam Hussein's legions to a standstill in an eight-year-war of attrition that killed about 1 million soldiers on both sides.

If, as Bush has indicated, U.S. troops were still in Iraq in 2009 under the next president, Tehran, in retaliatory animus, would pull out all the stops to ensure a Vietnam-like send-off for remaining U.S. forces in Iraq.

For the time being, Tehran is delighted to keep U.S. troops in Iraq as protective cover for Iran as it consolidates its influence throughout 60 percent of the country.

At the recent Berlin conference of the world's major powers -- the veto-wielding big five of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany -- there was opposition to any kind of sanctions against Iran. International Atomic Energy Agency's Mohamed ElBaradei, the world's nuclear watchdog, threw a damper on U.S. expectations by saying, "we need to lower the pitch."

For the time being, Iran's "cakewalkers" appear to be those in charge of diplomatic choreography. The Chinese are not about to blow their \$100 billion long-range deal for guaranteed oil supplies. Iran is also a good Russian customer. Germany, it now turns out, supplied Iran with some of the technology needed for the enrichment of nuclear fuel to weapons-grade standards.

A muscular sanctions policy does not appear to be Germany's thing either. So Iran's stealthy uranium enrichment is likely to continue unimpeded until the stealthy B-2s get the order to discombobulate the mullahs' nuclear plans. The ranking neocon thought this would be sometime between next November's elections and the presidential election two years later.

Before the Middle East's unfriendly volcano erupts again, it would behoove the National Security team to advise the president that kicking butt in Iran, like kicking Iraq's gluteal region, triggers the law of unintended consequences.



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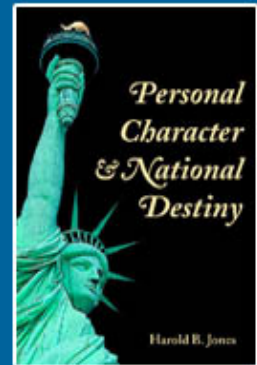
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