

## STRANGELY IGNORED CONSEQUENCE By Si Frumkin

The recent National Intelligence Estimate on Iran's decision to cancel its plans to build a nuclear device has resulted in a storm of controversy. Those who question the report include spokesmen for Israeli intelligence, scores of political and foreign affairs commentators, Iranian domestic and foreign opposition groups and those of us who have been taught by historical precedent that evil men often openly share their evil intentions with the world and are not believed until it is too late.

The opponents of President Bush – with very few exceptions – are celebrating the NIE. They see it as a justification of their constant characterization of Bush as a war monger, an imperialist, a puppet of evil forces that are moved by greed and disregard for decency. They see the NIE as forcing the administration to recognize that its Iran policy is stubbornly based on false premises that have now been exposed as groundless.

It is ironic that the conclusions reached by U.S. and international intelligence organizations on Saddam's possession of WMDs have been attacked by Bush's critics as phony and, in some cases, intentionally inaccurate and that the president has been labeled as a liar for agreeing with their conclusions, but that now the same critics regard the more recent NIE estimates, collected by the same organizations, as reliable guidelines for our foreign policy.

In this debate I am inclined to believe Israeli intelligence and my own common sense. I agree with Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak who said on December 4, "It looks like Iran stopped its program to create an atom bomb in 2003 for a certain time, but as far as we know, it has since probably renewed it." It seems to me that if Iran had really relinquished its nuclear weapon program then it would have been willing to allow external inspectors to verify this and so avoid all of its current political and economic problems that have been created. On the other hand, maybe rational thinking cannot be expected from psychopathic personalities like Saddam Hussein, Ahmadinejad and Kim Jung Il. After all, Iraq

- like Iran - also banned U.N. inspectors from investigating its nuclear and WMD projects even though they apparently they didn't really exist.

I readily admit that I not in a position to take a position in this debate – time and much more information will show whether the nuclear weapon program was indeed stopped in 2003, and whether it was or wasn't resumed in the 4 years that followed. I am, however, puzzled by the disregard in the discussion of a very significant element: the timing of Iran's alleged decision!

In April 2003, U.S. and British forces launched their ground attack in Iraq and within a few weeks the war was over. Saddam's threats of a "Mother of all Battles" and authoritative predictions international military experts of thousands of allied casualties came to naught. At the time, no one assumed that for years to come, the U.S. still had to face resistance by fanatical factions. The universal expectation was of a peaceful, orderly and tranquil occupation similar to those of Germany and Japan. What was obvious for all to see was that U.S. was indeed a military superpower eminently capable of dealing with its enemies. It had conquered Iraq within a matter of weeks just as it had defeated the Taliban in Afghanistan – where Russia was stuck for 5 years and from which it had to embarrassingly withdraw. Commentators had a field day speculating about the possibility of attacks elsewhere – Syria, Iran and Libya were among those mentioned – and countries that had not joined the original incursion hurried to send symbolic military units to join the Coalition.

North Korea was giving timid signals of seeking accommodation, several former Soviet republics began flirting with America and Libya openly renounced its plans to build nuclear weapons and opened its facilities to inspections. It is safe to say that in 2003 the countries that had offended America were getting very nervous. And this is precisely the time when Iran allegedly had a change of heart and made the decision to abandon its nuclear ambitions. We do not know when this became known to the West and whether the leak was a result of superb espionage or an Iranian policy decision to make it known.

The fact is that if the NIE is accurate, that decision was the result of American victory in Iraq and is yet another triumph of the usually denigrated Bush's foreign policy. The decision to accommodate and placate the U.S. in 2003 had to be a result of the war. We do not know if the decision was reversed during the 4 years that followed and the program was resumed, or if there was no halt at all, but the timing should be an important factor in discussing and evaluating our reaction to the NIE.

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