

Sloppy Iran Think by WPost's Cohen

In a powerful place like Washington D.C., sloppy thinking can have horrendous consequences, a truism that Big Media pundits have proved over and over. Now, the target is Iran and the usual suspects, the likes of the Washington Post's Richard Cohen, are back at it, as former CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

Richard Cohen's column in Tuesday's *Washington Post*, under the headline "Dangerous behavior from Iran," deserves scrutiny, and not just to pick on Cohen (although he deserves to be picked on for this kind of work).

The column exemplifies several of the types of distorted thinking and non-thinking that were critical in pushing the United States into an enormous blunder of a war eight years ago and are threatening a repeat performance with another of the countries in the same part of the world that has a four-letter name starting with "I."

Moreover, the column by Cohen, who on most matters other than stumbling into disastrous wars can be considered a liberal, illustrates how the arguments and attitudes that have greased the skids on which the United States can slide into such a war are not the exclusive province of neocons or others who are the prime movers of such misadventures.

The column begins, unsurprisingly, with the outrage *du jour*: that strange plot involving DEA informants and a used car salesman in Texas. Cohen has a nifty way to dispose of the chief reason skeptics have found it hard to believe this was an officially instigated Iranian operation, namely, the disconnect between the crazy nature of the plot and the careful tradecraft that the Iranians have consistently exhibited.

"I agree" the plot was crazy, says Cohen. "But so is Iran."

It's a rhetorical twofer: not only is the bizarre plot kept in play, but it is done in a way that pushes the main theme of the anti-Iran agitators, which is that Iranian leaders are supposedly irrational and thus cannot be trusted not to do crazy things with whatever capabilities they have, especially a capability as momentous as a nuclear weapon.

"The mistake with Iran," says Cohen, "is the tendency to think its leadership is rational."

But like others who invoke this theme, Cohen adduces nothing in the record of

behavior by the Islamic Republic that suggests irrationality and ignores the fact that the record is overwhelmingly one of caution and careful calculation.

Oh, Cohen cites a record, and like most others who do, it concerns Iran's past terrorist operations. But invoking the terrorist record ignores that these very operations were carefully targeted responses to what Iran's adversaries were doing, with every indication that the Iranians were fully mindful of consequences.

There were the assassinations (which pretty much ended a decade and a half ago) of expatriate dissidents, which served to eliminate a political threat to the leadership of the Islamic Republic.

Cohen tries to make an argument that the assassinations exemplify sloppy methods (even suggesting at one point that a stabbing is somehow sloppier than other methods of killing people), with the Iranians not covering their tracks well.

With hits on individual Iranian dissidents, part of the purpose was *not* to cover tracks but instead to send a message to other would-be oppositionists. When the target was foreign, the track-covering was careful and effective.

With the bombing of the U.S. military barracks at Khobar, Saudi Arabia, in 1996 (which Cohen also mentions), the tracks were so well covered that Iranian involvement was not established until years later.

Then there were the bombings by Lebanese Hezbollah against Jewish and Israeli targets in Buenos Aires in the early 1990s. As I briefly noted a few days ago, these operations were specific retaliatory responses to Israeli actions in the Middle East, each of which preceded the response by only a few weeks.

The bombing of the Israeli embassy in 1992 responded to Israel's assassination of Hezbollah secretary general Abbas Musawi. The bombing of the Jewish community center in 1994 was a response to Israel's kidnapping of Lebanese Shia leader Mustafa Dirani and bombing of a Hezbollah training camp in eastern Lebanon.

This kind of tit-for-tat retaliation is the epitome of carefully calculated use of the capacity to inflict deadly harm. The experience with Hezbollah in South America, far from demonstrating that Iran or its clients are apt to strike out irrationally, instead demonstrates a pattern of keeping a lethal capability in reserve and *not* striking out until being struck themselves.

Cohen plays the usual religion card in trying to establish the irrationality idea, referring to Iranians as "fervid Shiites." The card is ultimately just another instance of religious stereotyping and prejudice.

Is the fervidness of those Shiites, and the implications for public policy, including the use of military force, any greater than what one can find with, say, many fundamentalist Christians in the United States? Or with the religious right in Israel?

In referring to those feared possible Iranian nuclear weapons, Cohen raises another common specter, of an Iranian nuke touching off a spurt of proliferation throughout the Middle East.

And like others who raise it, he never considers why the sizable Israeli nuclear arsenal, which has existed since the 1970s and involves at least as much antagonism and unresolved issues as anything having to do with Iran, should not have already touched off such a spurt.

Speaking of Israel, Cohen goes on to note that while “few in the West take Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s threats to exterminate Israel seriously,” the “Israelis have some experience with the irrational and its consequences” and do not dismiss such threats.

Cohen doesn’t say explicitly what the implication of this observation ought to be for U.S. policy. That the United States should fall in line with the posture of a state whose own view of Iran is in large part driven by emotion and, dare one use the word?, irrational fears? It shouldn’t, but unfortunately to a large extent that is what is happening.

Cohen concludes his column by circling back to that weird alleged assassination plot. It would be an “incalculable mistake,” he says, for the United States to see the plot as “the reckless act of some runaway intelligence chief.”

He invokes no less an authority than the traitor in a John le Carre novel, who observes that intelligence agencies are “the only real measure of a nation’s political health, the only real expression of its subconscious.”

That’s right, says Cohen, and so the assassination plot “offers an insight into the entire Iranian regime. It’s too reckless to be allowed a nuclear arsenal.”

How’s that for the conclusion of a compelling piece of analysis? The caper involving the used car salesman and the DEA agent shows that Iran cannot be permitted to have a nuclear weapon; a fictional character in a novel says so.

With analysis like that it is not surprising that when reality finally intrudes, Cohen has a tendency to forget some of his own arguments. After three years of the ugly reality of the Iraq War, which Cohen had supported, he wrote a column calling for more leaking by government officials.

He said, "Among other things, the consensus at the CIA was that there was no link between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. And while the spooks of Langley more or less concurred that Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, they also thought his nuclear program was years away from fruition. In short, there was no urgent reason to go to war. I wish I had known that."

Amnesia must have set in before that last comment, because here's what Cohen had written in a column in March 2003, a week before the U.S. invasion:

"In the run-up to this war, the Bush administration has slipped, stumbled and fallen on its face. It has advanced untenable, unproven arguments. It has oscillated from disarmament to regime change to bringing democracy to the Arab world.

"It has linked [Saddam] Hussein to al Qaeda when no such link has been established. It has warned of an imminent Iraqi nuclear program when, it seems, that's not the case."

This was an accurate and perceptive capsule assessment of the Bush administration's case for war. And yet, Cohen still favored launching the war, referring (again, accurately) to Saddam Hussein's continued ambition to acquire nuclear weapons once the pressure was off.

What was not considered, of course, was the misery and mess that would follow the toppling of Saddam. Cohen became part of a drumbeat, initiated by the neocon promoters of the war and amplified by other opinion-shapers such as himself, that came to portray the Iraqi dictator as such a grave threat that he had to go.

The drumbeat beat away any concern about post-invasion messes, or about the non-imminence of an Iraqi nuclear weapon or the lack of an alliance between the Iraqi regime and al-Qaeda.

What leads the prime movers of the Iraq War, many of whom are also among the most active agitators for war against Iran, to promote such folly is a question for another day.

Their promotions are successful only if they get many others beyond their ranks, including the Richard Cohens of the world, to sway to their beat. They did it once, beginning about ten years ago. As frightening as it is to think about, they could do it again.

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