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Iran's Phantom Nukes **by Sheldon Richman**

We can all sleep easier today. Any plans President George W. Bush may have had to attack Iran were dealt a major blow by the news that U.S. intelligence now believes Iran stopped trying to develop nuclear weapons in 2003. That, by the way, was two years before Mahmoud “The New Hitler” Ahmadinejad became president of Iran (a post that does not include in its job description commander of the armed forces).

While few things are impossible, it will now be very difficult for Bush to send the bombers into Iran and wreak the death and destruction that would necessarily follow. Even the hawkish Robert Kagan, former foreign-policy advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney, had to concede, “The Bush administration cannot take military action against Iran during its remaining time in office, or credibly threaten to do so, unless it is in response to an extremely provocative Iranian action. A military strike against suspected Iranian nuclear facilities was always fraught with risk. For the Bush administration, that option is gone.”

In fact, it will be tough for Bush to maintain the UN sanctions that were imposed on Iran, let alone procure new sanctions.

The latest assessment of Iran's nuclear ambitions is a stunning development. Two years ago the Bush administration touted intelligence alleged to show that Iran was developing such weapons. Only several weeks ago Bush warned that if Iran were not stopped, World War III would follow. This week he said he did not know about the new National Intelligence Estimate when he made that chilling statement, although the estimate had already been written. Administration spokesmen say Bush was aware there was new information about Iran's activity but didn't ask for details.

Whether that is true or false, it is typical of this government.

We can only be grateful that this war-loving administration has once again discredited itself in the eyes of the world. The turnaround reminded everyone of the infamous Iraq WMD deception. At least this time we learned the facts *before* the war. How do we know these are the

facts? Reports out of the administration say release of the National Intelligence Assessment was delayed while critics tried their best to knock it down. They failed.

The right-wing microphone-wielding fantasy warriors all but accuse the intelligence agencies of treason, but that is just their standard line. Maybe the people who really wanted to sabotage Bush were those who hyped the Iraqi WMD story, since the failure to find any exotic Iraqi weapons left the president with much egg on his face and his credibility in tatters.

Characteristically, Bush is not letting facts get in his way. He says Iran remains a threat, while claiming that the assessment vindicates his policy. How's that again?

"I still feel strongly that Iran's a danger," Bush said.

But what do feelings have to do with it? What are the facts, sir?

"Look, Iran was dangerous, Iran is dangerous, and Iran will be dangerous, if they have the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon," he added.

And how does Bush think he can eliminate *knowledge*? Is the military developing a memory-erasing gas that he can drop on Iran? Isn't some of that information on the Internet?

And why is it dangerous for Iranians to know how to make a nuclear weapon (assuming they do) but not Americans? Do you wonder why so much of the world is suspicious of American power?

While it is good to see that the intelligence agencies are able to back down from a position after acquiring new information, we should keep in mind that the American people would not have been threatened by Iranian weapons. Intelligence officials affirm that Iranian leaders are not raving lunatics but calculating political leaders who have no desire to commit suicide. If the U.S. government were to show its peaceful intentions toward Iran — and to withdraw from the Middle East where it does not belong — it could have normal relations with that country.

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