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## **Shut Up about Iran** **by Sheldon Richman**

Here's some advice for Barack Obama, John McCain, and any other U.S. politician who feels the urge to issue a declaration about the election in Iran: Shut up.

True, Obama has said he does not wish to interfere in the Iranian election. Others, such as John "Bomb Bomb Bomb, Bomb Bomb Iran" McCain, have no such compunction. But any statement at all — even a statement about not making a statement — is a mistake. The record of the U.S. government in Iran over the last half-century is so tainted that it would be better for all officials to just keep quiet.

The results of the presidential election certainly suggest a fix. But that is for the Iranians to work out.

For the last few years, the U.S. "military option" has been prominently "on the table" when it comes to Iran. The U.S. government's closest ally in the Middle East, Israel — especially under the new hard-line prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu — clearly would like to see Iran attacked for having the nerve to develop nuclear technology. U.S. intelligence says Iran gave up a weapons program long ago — before Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became president — but Israel apparently won't tolerate an Iran even with only a civilian nuclear-power industry. Apparently the thought of another country's challenging Israel's 40-year nuclear-weapons monopoly in the Middle East — and thus being able to deter aggressive military action — is intolerable. (Ahmadinejad, incidentally, has no military authority under Iranian law.)

The U.S. government, then, can hardly be an unbiased observer of Iran's political process. Besides, it is well known that U.S. governments have routinely meddled in elections throughout the world, overtly and covertly. The National Endowment for Democracy, a government-funded organization, is just the most obvious way that American officials interfere. (Remember how outraged people were in the Clinton years when they thought the Chinese had funneled money into the U.S. electoral system?)

Most of all, the U.S. government needs to keep silent because of 1953. That was the year the CIA — that model of openness and commitment to democracy — drove an elected, secular

Iranian prime minister from office in order to restore to power the brutal monarch, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. For the next quarter century, the shah ruled with an iron fist — secret police, torture, the works. “Enlightened” Americans used to say that he was “dragging his people kicking and screaming into the twentieth century.” He was a close friend of American presidents and Israeli prime ministers, and a main instigator of high oil prices. With all that oil money, he could easily buy the latest weapons made by American contractors, keeping them and his American political sponsors happy. He was “our” man in one of the world’s hotspots.

It was a sweet deal for everyone — except average Americans and Iranians. In 1979 the Iranians had had enough and, led by the charismatic ayatollah, Ruhollah Khomeini, they again drove the shah from power — this time for good — in the Islamic revolution that has reigned in Iran ever since. The U.S. government’s crimes against Iran were not forgotten, as the U.S. embassy was seized and the personnel held hostage for 444 days. When the hostage crisis began, President Jimmy Carter dismissed the connection to 1953, claiming that it was “ancient history.” It is from such utterances that the term “ugly American” was born.

What was ancient to Carter and unknown to most Americans was fresh in the minds of Iranians. Middle-class Iranians may have a high regard for the American people and our way of life, but that does not mean they welcome intervention.

In Cairo, Obama acknowledged that history. Good. However, acknowledgement is not enough. Deeds must match regrets — if that’s what he feels — about 1953. The U.S. government must forswear intervention, take the military option off the table — and mean it.

The Obama administration says the United States has two concerns regarding Iran: its support for terrorism in the Middle East and its nuclear ambitions. Neither concerns the American people. Even if Iran builds a weapon, the leaders there are not suicidal. And the way for the United States to safeguard against terrorism is to follow a noninterventionist foreign policy. U.S. troops can’t be attacked in the Middle East *if they aren’t there*. Someone as bright as Obama ought to realize that.

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