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Obama's Drift Toward War With Iran

David Bromwich

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A story by Eric Schmitt in the *New York Times* on February 1 [reported](#) the testimony of January 31 by James R. Clapper, the director of national intelligence: Iran's leaders "are now more willing" to consider attacks inside the United States. The foggy grammar may be traceable to an editorial finger nudging the story. The real news of the Clapper testimony, namely that Iran is not working on a nuclear bomb (*is not*: no ambiguity there), was placed further down the page. When Schmitt mentions last fall's "suspected assassination plot" by Iran, he has the scruple to include the adjective "suspected." Details of the plot were so improbable -- its supposed executors were so crude, visible, and incompetent -- that it was [hard to credit the claim](#) that this had been ventured by the government of Iran at the highest levels. It looked more like one of the sting operations that have led to trials of suspected civilian terrorists, who get most of their ideas from the undercover agents that record the planning and spring the trap.

Of course, the suspected Iranian operation might have been the public face of an Israeli operation. We now know from Mark Perry's story "[False Flag](#)," in *Foreign Policy*, that Mossad agents in recent years posed as CIA agents to recruit Pakistani Jundullah terrorists in order to sow mayhem in Iran. Actions such as the "mysterious" recent explosions in Iran and the assassination of lower-echelon nuclear scientists on the streets of Tehran -- about which Israeli officials have expressed a public satisfaction that stops just short of claiming credit -- may also be taken as the handiwork of the United States if the false flag succeeds in planting false conclusions. This appears to have been the goal of the spate of recent killings and sabotage. The final aim for Israel and for its American assistants outside and inside the Obama administration,

is not, however, war with Iran but regime change. Regime change in Syria -- Iran's most potent regional ally -- is a related project of the Likud in Israel and the neoconservatives in America. In Syria the work is far along; in Iran, they want to speed it up.

The way to regime change in Iran (so the strategy dictates) must pass through the destruction of the Iranian economy and a mixture of violence and menace to provoke the Iranian government. The Likud and neoconservative hope is simply to reach a point (if possible, before November) where Iran hits out first against the powers that are choking its trade, undermining its industry, assassinating its citizens and serving up serial ultimatums.

This story is easily penetrable. It is only lightly masked, that is to say, by American channels such as section A of the *New York Times*. The cooked-up crisis, over Iran's supposed option of "breaking out" to manufacture a weapon, goes on a false premise. As Gary Sick has [explained](#), such an action would require Iran to expel the IAEA inspectors who are free order a surprise look at any site. The warning would come conspicuously, and Iran would have telegraphed its change to the world in advance. All the recent talk, bristling with expertise, about Israel giving the U.S. a 12-hour warning before an attack, is a diversion to play on popular fears. It keeps prodding the subject to keep the fever high in America -- a mood that is useful for many things, if you ever elect to use it. Practically speaking, what Benjamin Netanyahu and his defense minister Ehud Barak hope their actions may accomplish is another kind of breakout. They seek to lure Iran to attack American forces or American assets or Israel. In the latter case, they can claim that unless America does its duty and agrees to a joint attack, or takes the matter out of Israel's hands, Israel itself will attack.

In the last two years, the U.S. Congress has passed resolution after resolution [condemning](#) Iran, urging the president to do something hostile, and warning him against negotiations. The EU capitals, hungry for cheap oil and regional influence, clamor for the United States to do resolutely whatever it means to do. An intricate web has thus been constructed. Only great ingenuity and political talent could extricate an American president today. And while this was passing, how has Barack Obama been spending his time?

The president has made no comment on the situation. He has let it heat up for three years now, while the public mind grows swollen with false facts, and while negotiations, to the extent that there are negotiations, proceed under cover and in secret. As if negotiation were a shameful thing. Time does not tell for Obama. He will always have time. That was his philosophy in drawing out the health care debate for twelve months as his popularity sank from 70% to 45%. It was his policy once again, in catastrophically misjudging the odds for an agreement on the debt ceiling. In that affair, Obama hung back. He left it all in the hands of William Daley before sacking Daley and heading out on the campaign trail.

Obama never gets the jump on his opponents. But Iran, the site of his longest delay (because it is the most disagreeable problem he confronts), is the most important issue of his first term. Probably it is the most important he will ever confront in his life. If he drags the U.S. into another war, a war that will be seen throughout the Arab world as a crusade against Islam itself, this will be the thing Barack Obama is remembered for. Why does he suppose, with such recurrent fantasy, that tactical silence and secret action are superior to an honest grappling with

the work of public persuasion? The truth is that all Obama's big speeches have been about general matters: changes he sides with but cannot effect. Eventual health coverage for all Americans; the preservation of the middle class; peace among all nations. But Iran should be different.

Let us grant the obstacles, both internal and external. Obama is radically unsuited to crisis, in several ways we are now familiar with. He hates to be involved in negotiations; is easily bored, easily rankled, and hasn't the patience and the power of suspending vanity that are necessary for the work. Also (and this abets inertia), his convictions have surprised him by being weaker than he supposed. He came to the presidency with a sense of himself and the world that was fundamentally immature; his time in office has seen a slow process of public recognition of that fact. He is not a fighter. He is not a "good hater." He is not particularly loyal to his party. He is only now learning what it is to be a good explainer. Finally -- a tremendous error, with Iran -- he delegates rather than takes charge. Distaste for the battle of politics (a different thing from the contest of campaigning) is accompanied, in him, by a love of speculative discussions. So Obama waits; and while he waits, on any given question, the public mood drifts in a direction opposite from what he thought he was aiming for.

To whom has he delegated the matter of Iran? Dennis Ross above all -- the member of the DC permanent establishment who is most reliably associated with the Israel lobby. And Tom Donilon, who gained the president's favor by applauding his 2009 middle-range solution on troop escalation in Afghanistan. The major previous achievements of Dennis Ross are the Clinton and Obama approaches to Palestine. The result speaks for itself. Donilon has been as little in evidence as any head of the National Security Council; before Obama elevated him, he was best known for helping to organize the eastward expansion of NATO: a disaster whose consequences the American people have yet to appreciate fully. So these are the men the president trusts -- in the first case, because of the impeccability of his renown; in the second, because he falls in with Obama's own propensity to continue Cheney-Bush policies but do it slowly in a softer tone.

On Iran, Obama has come to a crossroads. He will soon be called on to refute accusations of weakness by an explosive demonstration of "strength." If things get to that point, there is no doubt that he will do what the war party expects him to do. He will do it to win the election, but he will work hard to convince himself that he does it to save Israel, America, the cause of democracy in Asia, and the future of humanity. The path has been made all the more tempting by the discovery -- a surprise perhaps to the president himself -- that he is not averse to war. His favored mode of killing is the drone strike. There, the man who shoots the missile is far behind the scenes and the president's command of the killing is behind the man behind the scenes. Stealth, secrecy, and aloofness from accountability all make drone attacks non-confrontational, in a way well-adapted to Obama's temperament.

The U.S. is flying drones over Iran. One or two have been brought down, and some Republicans called for revenge. What if more are brought down, and what if several more politicians join the outcry? The Israel lobby and its congressional hosts may then convert the issue into a national cause. This president, who is moving toward war while hiding his negotiations and explaining nothing about Iran to offset the popular fears -- is he ready to argue against another war? Or has

war with Iran (so long as it can be portrayed as begun by Iran) already in fact been selected as the path of least resistance?

In actual negotiations of all sorts, over the past three years, Barack Obama has seemed to believe that he is well served by staying well out. He may think so still. But all too conceivably, some day in the next few weeks or the next few months he will have maneuvered himself into giving another version of the Great Power speech he has given before; the one that begins, "So Iran has a choice." And yet, this president -- it was the single great difference between him and the other candidates in 2008 -- said he would negotiate with Iran. Nothing on any intelligence estimate has changed the nuclear status of Iran since he made that pledge. If he meant what he said, it was his business to lead public opinion to support the idea of negotiation and to educate the American people about the desired result.

While Obama waits, fortifications on the other side are being built up with fantastic brazenness. The *New York Times*, in almost back-to-back articles, [on the front page on January 27](#) and [on the cover of the magazine](#) on January 29, informed its readers that Israel has calculated the risk and feels sure that it will not suffer badly in any retaliation following an attack on Iran. The first of these stories, by Ethan Bronner, for some reason quoted only Israeli sources and took their declared estimates at face value. The second, by the Israeli journalist Ronen Bergman, ended by flatly predicting Israel would attack Iran in 2012. (Jeffrey Goldberg, prompted by the same Israeli government sources, in a similar article two years ago in the *Atlantic* [predicted](#) they would attack in 2010.)

There was a puzzling thing about the Bergman story. A series of paragraphs near the end conveyed the substance of conversations with Meir Dagan, the former head of Mossad; and everything that was credibly said by Dagan served to discredit the rest of the article. For those paragraphs establish beyond any doubt: (a) that the crisis is nothing like as desperate or "existential" as Netanyahu and Barak have implied, and (b) that there is no long-term insurance for Israel that bombing Iran tomorrow can be supposed to achieve.

Worse than the Bergman article were the publicity captions for it, done in the Hearst manner. All of the "conditions" have been fulfilled for an Israeli attack, these marginal summaries told us. The question was not "if" but "when": a word repeated twice, in different places. So the *Times* cues and the *Times* Israel reporters, especially the ones favored with front-page stories and cover stories, are saying this is a last chance for Iran. David Sanger said it was the last chance in May 2009 and, to repeat, Jeffrey Goldberg said it in 2010, but both have been [saying it again](#) over the past several months. Others, too, are saying it now; and an election is on, with more than the usual champing bellicosity among the actors on the Republican side. The people who are playing with fire are people who like to play with fire.

The administration has taken note of the reckless Israeli mood and has [warned against it](#) on traditional diplomatic lines (words from the secretaries of state and defense and a visit to Israel by the chairman of the joint chiefs); in this way, it has done what it can to calm any actual fears and reach a semblance of tactical accord with Israel. Yet it surely serves the interest of Netanyahu to stoke unreal fears, provided this can be done indirectly, through "legitimate" channels like the *New York Times*, as well as more extravagant channels like the casino

billionaire Sheldon Adelson. In a recent address ([summarized](#) by Michael Isikoff in an excellent piece of reporting), Adelson said that "unfortunately" he had worn an American uniform rather than an Israeli one when he served in the armed forces. That is the mode of thinking on that side.

The White House has worked up a story to justify Obama's passivity. The story says that sanctions -- the second half of the "dual track" negotiation-sanction policy installed and overseen by Dennis Ross -- can now appropriately be raised to a level of strangulation even if this provokes a war. Why? Because all other paths have been tried and exhausted, and the Mullahs of Iran and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad have proved obdurate. But what is the history of the administration's talks with Iran? They are the subject of a [new book](#) by Trita Parsi whose title, *A Single Roll of the Dice*, tells a good deal of its story. Parsi tracks the nature and duration of the Obama effort. The book is sober, thoughtful, judicious, and written by an eminent scholar of international studies. It has not yet been reviewed in the *New York Times*.

The Obama negotiations, as Trita Parsi recounts, were hampered throughout by Obama's superstitious awe of the Ross approach; but he did briefly venture on the path he promised.

Parsi begins his history in 2001. How many Americans are aware that Iran adopted a sympathetic posture toward the United States after the attacks of September 11? They "offered air bases for use by the U.S.," says Parsi, and "offered to perform search-and-rescue missions for downed American pilots." They also linked up with the Northern Alliance in fighting the Taliban, and "used information provided by American forces to find and kill fleeing al-Qaeda leaders." All this, however, was following the "Hadley Rules" -- named after Stephen Hadley, Cheney's mole (as he was nicknamed) in the Cheney-Bush White House. Hadley had laid it down that "tactical collaboration with rogue states" was permitted but the strategy of overthrowing them must not change.

Note that, like the Hadley Rules, the Ross protocol of the dual track or "hybrid option" -- tightening sanctions even while you offer to negotiate -- has been carried over unchanged from the Cheney-Bush to the Obama administration. The hybrid option is an immaculate conception. It is hard to find a case in history where such a policy, exerted against such an ambitious power, has led to peace and not war. But sanctions imposed by Obama and the EU (with partial, equivocal, irregular agreement by Russia and China) have kept biting deeper even as negotiation is offered: peace and favorable trade relations, in exchange for the surrender of low-enriched uranium (LEU). Iran was required to give up all enrichment as a precondition for any eventual accord.

Within the administration, opposition to Ross came from Gary Samore: an authority on nuclear proliferation. Samore favored direct bilateral talks; but in the end Obama handed the victory to Ross. (Though Dennis Ross has now left government, President Obama is so keen on advice from that quarter that he has [installed a phone](#) by which he can talk to Ross directly.)

The cautious Iran policy of this cautious president began sensibly enough; yet it was weakened early on by a want of initiative and imagination. Obama avoided starting the negotiations before the 2009 Iranian election in order not to be seen to assist Ahmadinejad. Also he seems to have been intimidated by Benjamin Netanyahu's insistence that no diplomacy with Iran last more than

two months and that the outcome be "zero enrichment." This public stand by America's most famous regional ally, backed by the enormous public throw-weight of the Israel lobby, marred Obama's efforts from the outset. Netanyahu demanded, in addition, that the Americans keep "all options on the table": a condition that led to some peculiar explorations of peaceable-belligerent phraseology by Joe Biden, Leon Panetta, and Obama himself.

As Trita Parsi notes, all this "militarized the atmosphere and created an environment that rendered diplomacy less likely to succeed or, worse, prevented it from being pursued in the first place." It was supposed to be a dual-track policy, yet in late March 2009 Robert Gates went on the record preferring sanctions to diplomacy. As with contradictory statements by other Obama officials about the same time, on the public option for health care and troop levels in Afghanistan, the off-script statement by the circumspect Gates was evidence of a president not in control of his own policies.

After George W. Bush and his fanatical condemnation of the "axis of evil," Iran, naturally enough, wanted a good-will gesture from Obama. He never offered one but, as in other areas, he nonetheless sought to distinguish himself by taking a different tone. He brought Iran into consultations on related issues such as Afghanistan; and he said that the U.S. would participate in negotiations via the Security Council. The closest Obama ever came to a gesture in words -- the New Year Greeting that he delivered in March 2009 -- was sabotaged by the rival New Year Greeting offered by Shimon Peres, the president of Israel. Peres conveyed his fervent hope that Iranians would rise up and overthrow their government.

In the Iranian election of June 2009 and its aftermath, it is not clear how far Obama and his advisers deceived themselves into thinking that a victory for Mir Hossein Mousavi might bring them closer to Iranian concessions on nuclear enrichment. Both candidates stood firm in defiance of the EU capitals and Israel. In any case, the tainted election and the murderous suppression of protest that followed made an unpropitious setting for the passage from a greeting on the air to a toe in the water of negotiations. Obama waited until June 23, 2009 to make a strong statement against Iranian government repression. He was thinking of the negotiations, and he was uncertain whose advice to follow.

The battle to slow the sanctions in order to give time for negotiations was lost in Congress in 2009 thanks to inaction by the president. Perception that is slow, recognition that comes late, signals that are mixed, and a policy that is ambiguous, these are hallmarks of Obama in foreign policy, and the result is often a "forced" acceptance of a course he had pledged to work against, followed by a public announcement of the change of path and final acquiescence in Bush-era policies. The general policy of the administration in the Arab world -- the Middle East, north Africa, and southwest Asia -- is consistent and clear. Its main features are: support of friendly autocrats, critical support of warlord clients, and, in relation to hostile or potentially hostile states, a drumbeat of threats and a steady subsidy of covert action to effect regime change.

Some of Parsi's grimmest pages concern the congressional push for sanctions. Demands from thoroughly lobbied members of Congress were hammering at Obama in late summer of 2009. Yet there was a contingent of Democrats ready to defend Obama's stance on the negotiations; these people looked for support and instruction to the president himself; but they heard nothing

in reply. Should Democrats in Congress save their own skins and join the clamor -- thus buying protection for the coming election? Or should they side with President Obama? The silence of Obama and his advisers assured the triumph of harsh sanctions. Indeed, more direct and thoughtful criticism of Netanyahu and his American war brokers was heard, at this time, from the state department than from anyone closer to the president. "House representatives and senators 'stuck out their neck for Obama'" Parsi recounts, by their refusal to support early sanctions but their offers of help were simply ignored. According to a senate staffer: "[The White House] didn't take advantage of us."

So on the most important issue of his foreign policy, and the one on which Obama at considerable risk had staked out an original position during the 2008 campaign, the president, at the heart of the crisis, in late 2009 left a message on his machine that said to all callers, "Not at home."

In response to the void of leadership or even elementary contact from the White House, there set in a certain prudential reserve among Democrats in Congress. Parsi again: "They did not want, as one senior Senate staffer said, to 'be more Catholic than the Pope' and take on a fight that the White House itself was not willing to support."

In the fall of 2009, we learn in *A Single Roll of the Dice*, the White House was at first dismissive of sanctions; after all, sanctions had no chance of success in Congress, they thought. And yet, "the dismissive mood almost immediately turned into resignation." The reason was the disengagement of the president.

The sanction side of the dual-track policy came to its climax in early October 2009. By then, Iran had dropped all talk of the suspension of sanctions as a condition for a new agreement, and discussions at Geneva, with Americans among the parties, were received favorably by the hardline cleric Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami. But a few days later, a setback occurred, as Obama seemed in danger of losing his quest for multilateral financial sanctions and Congress pushed for unilateral gasoline sanctions. At the second round of negotiations, on October 19, the sticking point was the central role assigned to France: a country that Iran with reason distrusts even more than it distrusts the U.S. Russia now interceded to subcontract for a swap of LEU in place of France. This modification was agreeable to Iran, and Mohammad ElBaradei said the talks had been constructive. The parties went back to their home countries for consultation and (they hoped) corroboration.

Iran, it should be noted, at this time was under immense pressure from the turmoil of its factions; and on October 29 its negotiators asked for further discussion. Hillary Clinton said no. Take the previous agreement or nothing. Her tactic worked as well as all ultimatums have ever worked on Iran. The EU capitals, the American Congress, and Israel (in reverse order of vehemence and importance) were eager to move toward "crippling" sanctions. The Obama administration showed no great resource in working against them. Such is the immediate background of the standoff today.

Obama took a serious risk in starting on the path of diplomacy soon after the tainted election in Iran. Parsi is candid here, both in his praise of the momentary daring this required and his verdict

on the poor judgment it betrayed. "At the end of the day, it was a risk that did not pay off for the president's desire to resolve tensions with Iran through diplomacy." Earlier engagement would have been better, and longer-lasting engagement would have been wiser. But the active phase of the Obama policy was a sprint with a full stop, capped by the premature decision to call it quits. "Iran's political elite was literally at war with itself," Parsi observes, and delays at such a time could have been anticipated as a predictable hazard.

Israel was pleased at the failure of the negotiations. The right-wing coalition government of Netanyahu "had told the Obama administration that they could accept diplomacy as long as Washington expected it would fail." Repeat: they could accept diplomacy as long as Washington was reasonably sure it would fail. This captures the present state of relations between Israel and the United States in all matters concerning the Arab world. It is a relationship Barack Obama has dared to challenge rhetorically but has never defied in action.

On Iran, as on Palestine, Netanyahu routed Obama. "Though the desire for diplomacy was genuine," writes Parsi, "the administration's lack of confidence in its chances of succeeding -- several high officials in the Obama administration told me separately that they did not believe diplomacy would work -- raises the question as to whether the White House would finally invest in a policy it believed would fail." This is a rare moment when Trita Parsi should have followed or clarified the direction of his thought. It would have been good to hear his speculation, marked as a speculation, about why the White House may have pursued a policy it expected to fail.

The departing chairman of the joint chiefs of staff in 2011, Admiral Mike Mullen said more than once that an Israeli strike against Iran "would be a big, big, big problem for all of us." The appointment of Mullen's successor, General Martin Dempsey, was greeted last June by an interesting headline in [Haaretz](#): "Obama's New Security Staff May Approve Attack on Iran." The only detail of the story to suggest an inference that Dempsey might approve an attack was the fact that, as head of Tradoc (Training and Doctrine Command), General Dempsey had expressed admiration for the Israeli conduct of the Yom Kippur war, and while on the job he worked with the regular IDF liaison officer at Tradoc. It remains to be seen whether he will speak out as strongly as Mullen did.

The detachment of the president, through much of the Iran process and in related matters, is captured by a single anecdote Parsi recounts. The scene is the middle of a tense meeting in which Obama alone was in a position to effect a change against plans for resumed construction by Israel in East Jerusalem. "Netanyahu would not yield, prompting Obama to abruptly rise from his seat and declare: 'I'm going to the residential wing to have dinner with Michelle and the girls.'" This exit was parenthetically qualified by a reassurance: he "would still be available if Netanyahu were to change his mind." But there is no mistaking the exit. It is not the gesture of a negotiator. It is unimaginable in FDR, Kennedy, or Carter at Camp David. Nothing could be more damaging than such a display of indifference and exasperation and the haughty assertion of "other things to do."

An eerily similar moment was recorded by Ron Suskind in *Confidence Men* as the cut that closed an important meeting with Obama's economic team. In the middle of a discussion about the

restructuring of the large insolvent banks, Timothy Geithner and Lawrence Summers resumed an argument the president had hoped was over. "Look," Suskind reports Obama saying, "I'm going to get a haircut and have dinner with my family. You've heard me. When I come back I want this issue resolved." By the time he returned, a phony consensus had been arranged to back "stress tests" as a substitute for the dismantling of "too big to fail" institutions that Obama originally proposed. He asked few questions. He was glad to see it solved while he was away.

On Iran, in the fall of 2009, Obama missed his chance for an agreement on a low-enriched uranium swap by dealing only in ultimatums. In spring 2010, he got a second chance and ignored it. This was the Brazil-Turkey swap of LEU which emerged as a concrete proposal acceptable to Iran. After the April 12 and 13 nuclear summit, negotiators for Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Recep Tayyip Erdogan were allowed to speak with Obama for 15 minutes, a meeting that was "tense and testy" on his side. "The mixed messages from Washington continued," writes Parsi. "Obama was skeptical of diplomacy, yet softly encouraged both Turkey and Brazil's efforts." He acted as if, unlike Netanyahu, he really would not mind if diplomacy succeeded. As it fell out, "by mid-May 2010 Brazil and Turkey had achieved what America and Europe had failed to achieve." This should have been good news; but Obama declined to seize an opening for which he could not have claimed the credit. An administration official speaks the most disquieting sentence in *A Single Roll of the Dice*, about the odd refusal of triumphant diplomacy by the president. "We could not take yes for an answer."

More than lack of imagination and personal vanity were here involved. With enormous bribes, Obama had succeeded in persuading Russia to join the latest regime of sanctions. He might lose face if, owing to Brazil and Turkey, he walked that bargain back. Even so, his "swift and undiplomatic rejection of the deal surprised a large number of officials within the U.S. government." Obama's letter specifying conditions for an LEU swap gave explicit support to the exact terms of the deal that was finally negotiated by Turkey and Brazil. Hillary Clinton had no answer, therefore, when the Brazilian diplomat Celso Amorim pointed out that Obama had rejected what Obama himself requested. But Washington had kept the president's letter "on the table" only because they assumed that the Turkey-Brazil negotiations would fail.

Gasoline sanctions were signed into law by Obama on July 1, 2010. He had taken a single roll of the dice. On this question, he did not ask to be summoned back from his dinner if anything new came up. The assumption was that further diplomacy would only weaken international support for sanctions.

Parsi concludes his narrative on an impartial note: "The political maneuverability Obama enjoyed on Iran when he first took office had by now been completely eaten away by pressure from Israel and Congress, the fallout from the June 2009 Iranian presidential election, and Iran's refusal to accept the Russian-American swap proposal in October 2009." But it is two other sentences, quoted from an administration official, that stay in one's mind: "The impression, right or wrong, that was created was that we could not take yes for an answer. That was not what I would call a triumph of public diplomacy." Parsi for his part adds that "the president's vision and political space were continually compromised." This cloudy statement is a rare deviation from the author's usual clarity. Compromised (one wants to know) in what way and by whom? Obama let this happen. Why has he apparently resigned himself to allowing Israel to dictate the course

of events? He might wish to have had the "vision" not to allow it -- but again, vision in what sense? Was there a group of advisers, a power within the power of the White House, who screened from the president's view and thereby obstructed him from seeing information he should properly have seen? Or does "vision" here refer to grand ideas of regional policy, such as Obama articulated in his Cairo speech of June 2009?

Anyway, it was a different vision we were asked to applaud, and a different policy had evidently been adopted, by the time he made his Nobel Prize speech on December 10, 2009. Iran diplomacy had broken up and Obama in Oslo reclaimed for America the title of beneficent world garrison state. That was the speech of a man who thought the United States should concede no particle of its dominance; the speech of a military president, proud of all the forces under his command.

What of Iran today? Parsi assigns at least equal blame for the failure of negotiations to the Iranian government. "Doubts about Obama's intentions and abilities made an already risk-averse leadership in Tehran more disinclined to take a gamble for peace." By the time the White House gave up negotiations, "the Obama administration simply had not settled on a desired endgame with Iran, on the nuclear issue or otherwise." *Otherwise* here means nothing less than the choice between war and peace. Has this question been answered even yet? The causes for the drift toward war are plain: "Obama never really fought at home to get the political space he needed to succeed." That fight would have meant a confrontation with Cheney, McCain, Lindsey Graham and the mob of the policy elite at the American Enterprise Institute. Such a confrontation Obama did not have the courage, foresight, or capacity to engage in. He had registered the ascendancy of Cheney's will over his own already in his National Archives Speech of May 2009 when he [signaled](#) that the War on Terror was morally right and the category of enemy combatant would be preserved, with an added category of permanent detainees. Cheney has won the security argument in Obama's mind, whenever there is an argument.

What is the prognosis? In foreign policy generally, Obama has done what Bush did or what Bush would have done in similar circumstances. He compensates by (a) doing it slowly and (b) giving it a less unpleasant name. The heavy rhetorical emphasis on multilateralism in NATO's deposing of Gaddafi is an example -- right down to the ad hoc coinage of the unhappy and quickly withdrawn phrase "leading from behind". The exception proves the rule: Obama likes Predator drone strikes and lethal action by the Navy Seals. To say it again: a main reason seems to be that these are acts he can order himself -- in secret, based on secret evidence -- which go forward without check or oversight. If the actions fail, they need not be publicized. He always wants to do something big, but he tends to think about policy in the most generalized way. ("We need more moon shot!" and "What is my narrative?" are two characteristic ruminations quoted by Suskind in *Confidence Men*.) Under pressure, Obama makes sure that progress is slow in order to keep a path open for turning back.

Nothing could be more disastrous for America and nothing could be less necessary than war with Iran. Obama's idea, if it is his idea, that he can assist or countenance or be party to an attack by Israel without deep repercussions against the United States and many of its assets and its people the world over, is the most desperate of fantasies. The repercussions, if they are not felt at once, will be felt for a generation and more. Obama has let the war party have their innings until they

are sure that they control him. All the signs now, and above all his reluctance to make a case for negotiation or even to hint at the progress of negotiations that may be taking place, suggest that the people who pitched for the Iraq war and have Iran in their sights are counting Obama as one of their own. He is reluctant, yes, but he is almost a committed man. The latest propaganda for war has gone so far that it will be a full-time effort to resist the momentum building to a "test" some time this year. As it stands, Iran is headed to become for Obama in 2012 what the economy was in 2010: a controllable crisis which, through personal inaction and conventional acquiescence in failed policies, threatens to pass utterly beyond his control.