

Senator Arlen Specter
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“If you want to make peace, you don’t talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies.” - **Moshe Dayan**

Chairman Carper, Senator Coleman, members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to make remarks before you today on U.S. policy toward Iran. I am very pleased to be joined by my distinguished colleague from California, Senator Feinstein.

The world is anxiously watching the US and Iran as so many of the issues confronting the international community and our citizenries are currently held captive by our inability to work together to resolve them.

Terrorism, military nuclear capabilities, energy, Iraq, and the Israeli-Palestinian dilemma are all major issues confronting the US and the world. All of these challenges are intrinsically linked with Iran and none can be sufficiently addressed or resolved without an appreciation for Iran’s role in each.

This realization was confirmed by the *Washington Post*’s Michael Hirsh on July 1, 2007, following his discussion with Mohsen Rezai, Secretary of Iran’s Expediency Council and the former commander of the Revolutionary Guards. Hirsh stated that Rezai, “pointed out that his is the only country [Iran] that can help Washington control Shiite militias in Iraq, slow the Taliban resurgence

in Afghanistan and tame Hezbollah's still-dangerous presence in Lebanon all at once. 'If America pursues a different approach than confronting Iran, our dealings will change fundamentally.'"

I believe that these challenges may have a better opportunity of being resolved with a rapprochement between the United States and Iran. Three decades of silence, broken only by a few whispers, which has categorized US-Iranian relations has not benefited either of our nations.

I am hopeful that the recent participation by both the US and Iran in international discussions to address stability and security in Iraq represents a positive step towards a thawing in the tensions between our countries.

However, the United States should be willing to negotiate directly with Iran. Success in diffusing the threat Iran poses will require multilateral assistance from other world powers, but our willingness to treat countries like Iran with respect could go a long way in disarming those nations militarily and diplomatically.

Undertaking this venture will not be easy, but in the words of Ambassador L. Bruce Laingen, the senior US official held hostage in Tehran for 444 days, "Diplomats should talk, even with our foes. That's what we do. It doesn't make sense for us not to talk to the Iranians. I'm not saying that I would confidently predict a breakthrough, but there must be some sort of dialogue."

My Senate assignments on the Intelligence Committee and Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations have provided me the opportunity to meet with Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad, Palestinian Chairman Yasser Arafat, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, Cuban President Fidel Castro, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, and others.

Those meeting have shown me that people are people, even at the highest levels of government. They are interested in a candid dialogue. They accept differences and disagreements as long as the tone is courteous. Regrettably, the worldwide “ugly Americans” reputation is encouraged, in my opinion, by our unwillingness to at least meet and talk one on one without preconditions.

Sun-Tzu’s advice to “keep your friends close and your enemies closer” is a good admonition to keep in mind as we approach our relationships in the world. Admittedly, it is difficult to accord respect and dignity to countries such as Iran, whom we have branded as part of the “axis of evil.” It is important to note, however, that President Ronald Reagan did just that when he invited Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev to a dialogue weeks after labeling the Soviet Union the “Evil Empire.”

During the Cold War, there was no greater threat to the US and our interests abroad than the Soviet Union. Today, in the words of Secretary Rice, “Iran constitutes the single most important, single-country challenge to... US interests in the Middle East and to the kind of Middle East that we want to see.”

In his November 21, 1985 address before Congress following the US-Soviet Geneva Summit, President Reagan highlighted the importance of dialogue with the then-greatest threat to the US: "As you can see, our talks were wide ranging. And let me at this point tell you what we agreed upon and what we didn't. We remain far apart on a number of issues, as had to be expected. However, we reached agreement on a number of matters, and as I mentioned, we agreed to continue meeting, and this is important and very good. There's always room for movement, action, and progress when people are talking to each other instead of about each other."

This Administration has labeled Iran as part of the “axis of evil.” History has shown it is possible to engage in tough dialogue and, at the same time, work toward negotiations, no matter how difficult the adversary may be.

Perhaps irrelevant, my first assignment as assistant district attorney in Philadelphia was interviewing inmates for commutation of sentences to life imprisonment from death in the electric chair for first degree murder. That experience taught me that you can have a meaningful dialogue with anyone.

There is no doubt that Iran has been trying to flex its muscles since 1979 when the shah was deposed. Iran is a proud nation with a rich history. In asserting its right not to be restrained in developing nuclear technology, Iran seeks to be a world power, and its leaders think that status and respect can be achieved by becoming a nuclear power. A good starting point for US-Iran relations would be to treat them as equals for the purpose of negotiations. It does not give them the same status as being a nuclear power, but it could be a good step forward if mighty America would treat them with respect while negotiating.

My Efforts To Engage Iran

I have tried to visit Iran since the Iran-Iraq War ended in 1988. I have not yet succeeded. In lieu of traveling to Tehran, I have made several efforts to reach out to Iranians in hopes of fostering dialogue. I was the only member of Congress to attend the address by former President Khomeini at the National Cathedral. For many years, I have traveled to New York City in an effort to reach out to Iranians such as the former ambassadors to the United Nations in New York, Seyed Mohammed Hadi

Nejad Hosseinian, Mohammad Javad Zarif, and Mohammad Khazaei in an effort to foster an exchange of visits by members of Congress to Iran and Iranian parliamentarians to the United States to try to open dialogue between our two countries.

I thought my efforts finally came to fruition in January 2004 when plans were made for US members of Congress to meet with Iranian parliamentarians in Geneva. Unfortunately, Tehran later rescinded the invitation, declaring it was “not on their agenda.”

On May 3, 2007, I spearheaded an effort, with support from Senators Biden, Hagel and Dodd and Representatives Lantos, English, Moran, Gilchrest and Meeks, to establish a parliamentary exchange with Iran. I believe that by opening and maintaining an active dialogue at the Parliamentary level we will preserve the potential to foster understanding and solutions.

On May 15, 2007, the Associated Press reported that “Iranian deputies were gathering signatures to try and form an Iranian-US friendship committee in parliament.” According to the AP, Darioush Ghanbari, one of the ten members who has reportedly signed the document, said Iranian parliamentarians were seeking to reduce tensions with American and that “In the absence of formal diplomatic relations, we seek to establish a parliamentary relationship with the US Congress and fill the existing gap of contacts between the two nations.” The AP quoted Ghanbari as saying, “This is our positive response to calls by members of the US Congress to establish contacts with Iranian parliamentarians.”

Last fall I called Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to discuss Iran’s nuclear activities and solicit his views on an exchange of

parliamentarians. Following our conversation, he extended an invitation to me to visit him in Vienna to discuss further the issues surrounding Iran's nuclear ambitions.

On January 8, 2008, I met with the Director General in Vienna. He suggested that direct U.S.-Iranian negotiations should begin immediately to resolve the impasse. The U.S. and international community need to understand what the nuclear issue means to Iran with respect to its position in the region and the world, that there needs to be an understanding of the repercussions and that it must be done in a manner that allows all sides to save face.

We discussed Secretary Rice's precondition that the U.S. would only meet with Iran if they halt enrichment. He said there must be middle ground to bring the parties together on this issue. He emphasized that sanctions alone won't resolve the situation and only makes people more hawkish.

On numerous occasions, both on and off the record, I have urged Secretary Rice to undertake bilateral negotiations with Iran. The Administration has indicated they will talk with Iran provided they suspend enrichment activities. On April 9, 2008, I told Secretary Rice, "Frankly, I think it's insulting to go to another person or another country and say, 'We're not going to talk to you unless you agree to something in advance.' What we want Iran to do is to stop enriching uranium. That's the object of the talks. How can we insist on their agreeing to the object that we want as a precondition to having the talks?"

2003 – A Grand Opportunity, Neglected

The concept of dialogue between the US and Iran is not unfamiliar to this debate. Both sides have previously taken one step toward the table and one step back time and again. Unfortunately, this tentative shuffle has never amounted to anyone sitting down at the table at the same time.

Perhaps one of the best opportunities to engage in serious dialogue with Iran came during the Spring of 2003. Press reports have suggested the existence of a document that was passed to the United States through the Swiss Ambassador to Iran and later rejected by the Administration. The document laid out issues for the US and Iran to discuss and parameters for dialogue.

According to Michael Hirsh of the *Washington Post*, "Iranian officials used their regular Swiss intermediary to fax a two-page proposal for comprehensive talks to the State Department, including discussions of a "two-state approach" to the Israeli-Palestinian issue."

In an April 22, 2007 response to my February 19, 2007 inquiry regarding the 2003 memorandum, Assistant Secretary of State (Legislative Affairs) Jeffrey Bergner stated, "In early May 2003, the State Department met with the Swiss Ambassador to Tehran, Tim Guldemann, who presented an independent proposal he had drafted with Sadeq Kharrazi, then Ambassador of Iran to France and former Deputy Foreign Minister. The State Department reviewed the 2003 communication carefully and discussed it with Ambassador Guldemann, but Department officials were not confident that Iran's leadership had endorsed the plan. The Department did not at that time, and does not today, characterize the message as a serious offer from the Iranian Government."

This characterization appears to run contrary to the views held by Secretary Powell, his Chief of Staff Larry Wilkerson, Undersecretary Burns and Flyntt Leverett, a member of the National Security Council under then NSA Rice.

Karen DeYoung, in her 2006 biography of Powell, *Soldier: The Life of Colin Powell*, confirmed Powell's interest in dialogue: "Powell also urged a renewed effort to engage Iran, where the

ruling ayatollahs were increasingly being challenged by democratic opposition. After secret, indirect talks were initiated with Washington in the early spring of 2003, Tehran sent a message through the Swiss government during the first week in May. Apparently approved by all factions of the divided Iranian regime, it recognized the need to address US concerns on a range of issues—including nuclear weapons, terrorism, and support for a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In exchange Iran wanted an end to US sanctions and “axis of evil” rhetoric, and an eventual reestablishment of diplomatic relations. But as usual the administration was unable to agree internally on a response. Powell thought the possibility of talks was worth exploring, but the only official US answer was a rebuke to Switzerland...for ‘overstepping’ its mandate by transmitting the message. Any hope of dialogue with Tehran ended with the May 12 explosion of a powerful car bomb in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, that killed thirty-four people, including eight Americans....Powell publicly suggested that the talks might eventually be resumed, but Rumsfeld pressed for a more decisive ‘regime change’ option and insisted that ‘our policy’ was not to deal with Iranian leaders at any level.”

Various reports also indicate that Secretary Powell’s Chief of Staff, Lawrence Wilkerson, took the proposal seriously and thought it was worth pursuing. According to a February 8, 2007 *Newsweek* article, “Wilkerson said in an e-mail that it was a significant proposal for beginning ‘meaningful talks’ between the US and Iran.” On January 17, 2007, Wilkerson told the BBC, “We thought it was a very propitious moment” to engage Iran “but as soon as it got to the White House, and as soon as it got to the Vice-President’s office, the old mantra of ‘We don’t talk to evil’... reasserted itself.” This statement indicates that the memorandum was transmitted to the White House for consideration.

Former Undersecretary for Political Affairs, Nick Burns, confirmed that there was a paper presented by the Swiss Ambassador in 2003 concerning a purported offer made by Iran for what could be called a grand bargain. Undersecretary Burns said that while there was some skepticism about the

paper, it was a matter which should have been pursued. Burns said in light of the extensive US-Iranian cooperation on Afghanistan, it would have been a natural flow to pick up on the 2003 memorandum especially given the United States' considerable leverage which came as a result of the successful US military action against Saddam.

On February 14, 2007, *The Washington Post* reported, "Flynt Leverett, who worked on the National Security Council when it was headed by Rice, said a proposal vetted by Tehran's most senior leaders was sent to the United States in May 2003 and was akin to the 1972 US opening to China. In December 2006, Leverett, according to a February 8, 2007 *Washington Post* article, "charged that the White House orchestrated an effort by the CIA to demand significant deletions in an opinion article he had written on Iran policy on the grounds that the material was classified. 'The single biggest rescission' concerned his description of Iran's 2003 offer'" according to Leverett.

When asked which officials knew about the 2003 offer, Leverett, in a February 15, 2007 Reuters report, "said he was confident it was seen by Rice and then-Secretary of State Colin Powell but 'the administration rejected the overture.'"

On February 8, 2007, an article in the *Washington Post*, stated, "Last June, Rice appeared to confirm, in an interview with National Public Radio, that the White House had received the memo. 'What the Iranians wanted earlier was to be one-on-one with the United States so that this could be about the United States and Iran,' Rice said. State Department officials at that time did not dissuade reporters from interpreting her comments as referring to the 2003 fax."

However, on February 27, 2007, when I questioned Secretary Rice on the matter, she stated, "I just don't ever remember seeing a paper of that kind."

Given the ambiguity and differing accounts, it remains unclear what route the 2003 memo took and the ensuing chain of custody. However, it is noteworthy that senior leadership at the State Department and the NSC had acknowledged the existence of the memo. It is equally important to note that there was a sense at the upper echelon's of the Administration that this was an opportunity to engage Iran.

Afghanistan - Recent Cooperation

While some cannot fathom the possibility of cooperation between the US and Iran, it was not so long ago where the Islamic Republic was very helpful to the United States.

According to a January 2008 report by the US Institute of Peace, “....Tehran's cooperation with the United States during the 2001-2002 negotiations on Afghanistan is a case in point. At that time, the Iranians knew very well how they would benefit from the downfall of the Taliban and from its replacement by a government that did not subscribe to a radical anti-Shia and anti-Iranian ideology. Similar consideration should apply in the case of Iraq, where the Islamic Republic, in the interest of its own survival, shares the American aversion to a divided Iraq, and Iraq dominated by Sunni extremists, or an Iraq under a new version of Saddam Hussein.”

Secretary Burns confirmed that Iran was helpful in cooperating with the United States on Afghanistan. They supported the Northern Alliance in combating the Taliban, participated in joint planning on potential refugee issues, cooperated on counter-narcotics and supported Hamid Karzai. Burns said in light of these extensive contacts, it would have been a natural flow to pick up on the paper which the Swiss Ambassador brought in 2003. Burns noted that at that time the United States

had considerable leverage as to Iran since both those countries were worried that they might be next after the successful US military action against Saddam.

Secretary Burns noted that the meetings with Iran over Afghanistan and the subsequent meetings with Iran concerning Iraq have provided some significant precedents for multi-lateral meetings. U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, has met with his Iranian counterpart at least three times since May 2007. While these sessions have not resulted in diplomatic breakthroughs, they hold promise for higher level talks in the future. It is my sense that there remains a compelling case for the US and Iran to work together on issues pertaining to Afghanistan.

Iran's Regional Influence

Power politics seen in disagreements between Washington and Tehran over the nature of Iran's nascent nuclear program seem to play out in Iran's continued support of insurgents in Iraq. Iranian support for the terrorist organization Hezbollah has hindered the Lebanese government from consolidating power. A weak Lebanon has turned into a safe-haven for terrorists. Hezbollah's terrorist actions against Israel have caused the Israel-Palestine peace process to stall, in the wake of which Hamas has strengthened.

When considering US policy towards Iran, one must consider the state of affairs in Iraq. We have seen the deeply concerning statements made about Iran's involvement in Iraq. It is clear today that the US is paying a great price for its presence in Iraq: lives lost, money spent, and influence squandered. Many of the problems the US is encountering in Iraq have roots that spread beyond Iraq's borders.

On March 8, 2008, *The Economist* reported “But it was not just Iranian mortars that may have preceded [Iranian President Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad’s [March 3-4, 2008] visit to Baghdad. The presidential visit—the first by any regional head of state since the American invasion five years ago—is only the latest sign that Iran is now the most influential of Iraq’s neighbors, pushing aside nearby Sunni Arab states from which Iraq’s Shia leaders still keep their distance. During his two-day visit, Iran’s president announced \$1 billion in loans, as well as a clutch of trade pacts with his ‘brotherly’ neighbor.” Iran’s ambassador to Iraq, Hasan Qomi said last August that Iran-Iraq trade in 2006 totaled \$2 billion — 97 percent of that exports from Iran into Iraq. Iranian Commerce Ministry officials say they hope trade will rise to \$10 billion in the next five years.

I would urge the Committee to consider the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group (ISG), led by Congressman Hamilton and Secretary Baker. This distinguished panel recommended, "Given the ability of Iran ... to influence events within Iraq and their interest in avoiding chaos in Iraq, the United States should try to engage them constructively."

I would further commend considering the 2004 Council on Foreign Relations task force report, co-chaired by current Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who was also an original member of the ISG. This task force concluded that, “it is in the interest of the United States to engage selectively with Iran to promote regional stability, dissuade Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons, preserve reliable energy supplies, reduce the threat of terror, and address the ‘democracy deficit’ that pervades the Middle East as a whole.” While Secretary Gates’ role has changed since the issuing of that report, I would note his statements to Congress that, “no option that could potentially benefit U.S. policy should be off the table” and even “in the worst days of the cold war the U.S. maintained a dialogue with the Soviet Union and China.”

The Problem with Outsourcing Foreign Policy

The United States has responded to Iran's challenge by correctly recounting Iran's dubious nuclear behavior and disregard for the international community but has avoided direct dialogue with Tehran. I commend the administration's change in course, deciding to deal with Iran through multilateral talks, and view it as confirmation that a change in our tactics is overdue. Prior US policy committed to deal with Iran via the UN Security Council and the Europeans. Prospects remain dim, however, for garnering support from China and Russia for a UN resolution with teeth. Russia's and China's significant energy, military, and political interests restrict their ability to support tough action against Iran and represent a significant barrier to a successful resolution vis-à-vis the U.N.

Although the Europeans are supportive of tough action against Iran, some are hesitant to continue down a path on which they feel the United States is not fully committed and not an active partner. Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and the UN Secretary General have all indicated that the United States needs to be directly engaged in the Iranian effort.

Senator Chuck Hagel, with whom I have worked on this issue, highlighted the importance of US involvement: "US allies will support tough action against Iran only if they are confident the US is serious about achieving a negotiated, diplomatic solution. Continued unwillingness of the United States to engage Iran will make other states hesitate to support, and possibly oppose, these tougher measures."

While sanctions are a tool this committee should take under consideration as part of the broader debate, they should not be confused as a panacea to confront this nuclear threat. Neither US

nor UN sanctions have proven they can halt uranium enrichment. The fact remains that Iran, despite these sanctions, continues to move towards a nuclear capability. French President Sarkozy stated it well, “The threat of sanctions coupled with an offer of dialogue was the only way of avoiding a catastrophic alternative: an Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran.” The US has pushed the sanctions portion of this equation but failed to include the necessary dialogue which is needed to equal success.

Periodically, I read the military options are some of these tougher actions that may be considered to confront Iran. Although the option should not be removed from the table, military engagement will do nothing to solve the litany of problems between our nations. We should only consider going to war when we have exhausted all options. Today, we are not there. In that light, I commend President George W. Bush for his May 24, 2006, statement that “our primary objective is to solve this problem diplomatically.” I believe diplomatic options remain, and it is precisely these options that can prevent conflict.

Why has it taken so long to consider talking to the Iranian regime? Richard Armitage, former deputy secretary of state, told *Time*, as reported in a May 22, 2006 article, “It appears that the Administration thinks that dialogue equates with weakness, that we’ve called these regimes “evil” and therefore we won’t talk to them. Some people say talking would legitimize the regimes. But we’re not trying to change the regimes, and they’re already legitimized in the eyes of the international community. So we ought to have enough confidence in our ability as diplomats to go eye to eye with people—even though we disagree in the strongest possible way—and come away without losing anything.”

To be certain, we find ourselves in this position in no small part due to Tehran’s deceit and arrogance toward the international community. Nevertheless, US policy toward Iran has played into

the hands of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the hard-line radicals in Tehran. Although the extent of Ahmadinejad's power remains unclear, the US administration's discussions of regime change and refusal to rule out using nuclear weapons against the Iranian regime have bolstered its position. Such US rhetoric, coupled with other policies, enhances Tehran's ability to tap nationalistic sentiments to solidify support for a nuclear weapons program, effectively taking the focus away from its constituents' discontent with failed domestic policies, most notably Ahmadinejad's poor stewardship of the economy. To some degree, we are the distraction buttressing his position. In this perfect storm, Ahmadinejad's rise on the wave of oil revenues and growing global discontent with US policies has afforded him the forum, confidence, and leverage to challenge the United States and the international community.

One proposal I urge the committee to consider is that offered by Russian President Vladimir Putin. As reported on October 18, 2007 by the *New York Times*, "Moscow proposed to enrich uranium in Russia for use in Iranian reactors, assuring that Iran would not produce the highly enriched uranium needed for nuclear weapons."

During the April 9, 2008 Appropriations Subcommittee Hearing on State and Foreign Operations, I reiterated my support for Russia's proposal with Secretary Rice. I was pleased to hear that the Administration is fully supportive of that approach and would urge all sides to continue to consider this option.

Deciphering and Reaching Beyond Tehran

It is still unknown what level of power and influence Ahmadinejad holds within Iran. Some accounts indicate that Iran's elite, and even some hardline officials, are critical of Ahmadinejad's

aggressive handling of the nuclear issue, whereas others report that he has amassed significant power. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that much of the power in Tehran does not rest with the president, but with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the mullahs.

Notwithstanding Iran's leadership, we must constantly remind ourselves of those over whom they rule. The United States should effectively communicate our desire for a prosperous Middle East, free of tyranny and oppression that respects human rights and rule of law and where governments represent and reflect the desires of those they govern. Further, we should be frank when conveying our concerns and those of the world to the Iranian people over specific problems threatening peace and security. Nearly three quarters of Iran's 70 million people are under the age of 30. Placing our disagreements with Iran's leadership aside, not letting these people know what we stand for and what we value would be irresponsible. The United States should focus on the emerging population and those who yearn for increasing freedom and reform.

According to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a 2002 poll, commissioned by Iran's legislature, revealed that three quarters of Iranians favored rapprochement with the United States and that nearly one half believed US policy was "to some extent correct." In typical Iranian fashion, the two pollsters were later sentenced to nine years for "publishing nonscientific research." It is precisely examples such as this that fuel disdain amongst Iranians for their leadership. President Bush poignantly illustrated the plight and underscored the hopes of the Iranian people in a July 12, 2002, statement: "The people of Iran want the same freedoms, human rights, and opportunities as people around the world. Their government should listen to their hopes....As Iran's people move towards a future defined by greater freedom, greater tolerance, they will have no better friend than the United States of America."

When Ahmadinejad or any Iranian leader calls into question the virtue and value of liberal democracy, we should respond by touting its successes. We should talk about our commitment to rule of law, individual liberties, and freedom of press and speech. Are not freedom of speech, press, and association liberties that the Iranian people would enjoy? Would those incarcerated in Iran for criticizing the government not wish to be freed? Most importantly, liberal democracy has better arguments than theocracy, and we should not shy away from this debate. Perhaps a crash course in the history of authoritarian failures would be the best place to start.

Learning from Libya

In the 1980s, Libya was the leading state sponsor of terrorism. Its leader, Muammar el-Qaddafi, was among the world's most reprehensible individuals. Among the international pariah's terrorist actions were the 1986 bombing of La Belle Discotheque in Berlin, which killed two American servicemen, and the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103, which killed 259 passengers, most of them American.

On December 19, 2003, Libya declared that it would surrender its nuclear program to international authorities. Why did this happen? Some indicate it was a reaction to US military action against Iraq. However, according to a May 16, 2006 *Wall Street Journal*, it was "largely secret talks [with US and British negotiators] that helped prompt Libya's decision." According to Duke University professor Bruce Jentleson, "It was force *and* diplomacy, not force *or* diplomacy that turned [Qaddafi] around...a combination of steel and a willingness to deal."

I visited Libya in August 2006. By this time, Libya had relinquished its nuclear program, had begun working on reparations to the victims of its terrorist actions, and was expressing a strong desire to re-enter the international fold. Direct talks with Libya served US interests. Colonel Qaddafi agreed to cede Libya's weapons program. The lesson to be learned is that Colonel Qaddafi agreed to do so during the course of negotiations—not before they began. Perhaps we can learn from this experience and apply it to our dealings with Iran.

What's at Stake?

The United States is not to blame for Iran's devious and deceptive behavior, nor their arrogance and defiance of the international community. The consequences of an Iran with nuclear weapons would be grave. Tehran does not seem willing to cease uranium enrichment. We are running into walls in the form of China and Russia in the UN Security Council, and it is apparent that the UN has not been able to alter Iran's behavior. It is precisely Iran's ambitions that may drive regional powers such as Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia to pursue nuclear ambitions. The Middle East is already a volatile neighborhood. The phrase "adding fuel to the fire" does not approach describing what the introduction of nuclear weapons would mean, not only for the fate of the region but for the world.

There is no greater threat to our national security than the proliferation of nuclear weapons. In dealing with aspiring nuclear powers, we have an obligation to exhaust ourselves on the diplomatic front before we consider alternative options.

No nation is a more capable conduit of peace than ours. We have a long and proud history of global engagement: bettering the lives of others while protecting our own national interests. In the modern era, we have witnessed assertive American engagement in the Middle East. We must not stray from this tradition. I urge this Administration and future Administrations to look back at the efforts of the United States to work towards peace and security.

Twenty-seven years of silence broken only by a few whispers, however, has not worked and has left us in the dangerous predicament in which we find ourselves today. All the while, the United States has been watching from the sidelines. Something has to give. Current US policy does not include direct talks with Iran with no preconditions. Certainly it is time to stop passing notes to Tehran via the Swiss and sit down and start talking.