

Groundhog Day

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Stop us if you've heard this one before. The Bush administration creates a false sense of urgency about a nuclear menace from a Middle Eastern country. Hard-liners talk about that country's connections to terrorists. They portray European diplomatic efforts to defuse tensions as a feckless attempt to appease a rogue nation whose word can never be trusted anyway. Secretary of State Colin Powell makes ominous-sounding warnings about new intelligence, which turns out to be dubious.

That is how President Bush rushed the country into an unnecessary conflict with Iraq in his first term, and we have been seeing alarming signs of that approach all week on Iran.

Let's be cleareyed about this: Iran has an active nuclear program, has not tried terribly hard to hide it and has been dishonest in its dealings with the West. But nothing we have seen suggests some new, urgent development in Iran that would impel American officials to start talking about "the military option." In fact, the most recent developments have been encouraging. Last week, under the threat of a looming U.N. deadline, Tehran said it would freeze all uranium and plutonium processing and invite back international inspectors.

It was a welcome step, resulting from efforts by Britain, France and Germany, and signaled that even the hard-liners in Tehran are susceptible to economic appeals. If the negotiations over Iran's nuclear programs go well, Europe promises to resume talks on a preferential trade agreement. If they don't, it will be time for international economic sanctions. After meeting with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Mr. Bush went out of his way to praise and endorse the Europeans' efforts.

But on Wednesday, Mr. Powell suddenly offered scary sounding talk about new intelligence that supposedly showed that Iran was not only working on enriching uranium, a big step toward making a bomb, but was also working on ways to attach such a weapon to a missile. His alarmist tone was a bit puzzling, since everyone has already agreed that Iran has nuclear ambitions, and it's hard to imagine a country wanting to own a nuclear bomb without exploring ways to use it. The world has also known for years that Iran was testing guided missiles.

Puzzlement turned to alarm yesterday when The Washington Post reported that Mr. Powell's comments were based on unverified information that had been brought to the United States by a previously unknown source whose reliability and authenticity had not yet been vetted. That certainly did bring back old memories - of Mr. Powell assuring the world that Iraq was developing nuclear weapons, based on fanciful intelligence reports about aluminum tubes.

Steven Weisman of The Times reported that administration hawks were also talking about fresh intelligence on Iran's support for Hezbollah, which the world has known about for decades, and Iran's support for insurgents in Iraq, another old story. The hawks seem to be already starting to throw cold water on the prospects for a negotiated solution to the Iranian nuclear problem while trying to open the door to contemplating a military option. An administration official told The Times that Mr. Powell was trying to avoid meeting with the Iranian foreign minister at a conference both men are to attend in Egypt next week.

Small wonder, then, that the Europeans started to accuse Washington of trying to undermine diplomacy with Iran, just as the Bush administration thwarted their efforts to resume the U.N. inspections of Iraq - inspections that we now know had been highly effective.

Iran has long been a target of the hawks in the administration, who are undoubtedly feeling their oats after the election. But we hope that President Bush has learned enough from the Iraq adventure to understand the dangers of using flawed intelligence to create a false sense of urgency about a national security threat.

Obviously, a nuclear-armed Iran run by its current brand of extremists, who have twisted religion to support terrorism, would be a cause for real concern. But there is no military solution here. Iran's scattered and secretive nuclear program cannot be bombed out of existence. And even if the United States had not stretched its military to the limit in Iraq, invading Iran, a country of nearly 70 million people, would be a catastrophic mistake.

The Bush administration has said that stopping the proliferation of nuclear weapons is at the top of its foreign policy agenda. That's where it belongs. But it's a goal that can be pursued only through truly multilateral diplomacy, in which the United States works with its European allies, rather than trying to undermine them, and the Europeans are prepared to stand behind Washington with a credible threat of economic sanctions when they are justified. It is not an excuse for war or even for pretending that war is a rational option.