

# American Intelligence

By Claude Moniquet

The citizens of the free world have nothing to worry any more—America's spy masters have recovered their missing crystal ball. No fewer than 16 U.S. intelligence agencies have just told us that the Iranian nuclear program really is not so dangerous. According to the National Intelligence Estimate, Tehran has, for reasons yet to be explained, supposedly stopped the military plank of its atomic research.

Before rolling out the peace banners, though, it's worth looking at the agencies' track record in getting these sorts of "estimates" right. As a matter of fact, U.S. intelligence services have so far failed to predict the nuclearization of a single foreign nation. They failed to do so with regard to the Soviet Union in 1949, China in 1964, India and Pakistan in 1998, and North Korea in 2002. They also got Saddam's weapons program wrong—twice. First by underestimating it in the 1980s and then by overplaying its progress before the 2003 invasion. But on the possible nuclearization of a regime that sounds fanatic enough to use this doomsday weapon, the NIE, contradicting everything we have heard so far about the issue, including from a previous NIE report, is suddenly to be trusted?

It's not just on the nuclear front where American intelligence services have failed their country. They foresaw neither the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 nor the collapse of the Soviet Union two years later. In Afghanistan, during the 1980s, while other friendly services, among them the French, urged the CIA to support more "moderate" tribal chiefs in the fight against the Red Army, the agency relied on the enlightened advice of its Saudi friends and supported the most extreme Islamists.

U.S. troops are fighting and dying today for that blunder.

More recently, the CIA conducted those "extraordinary renditions" of terrorist suspects in such an amateurish manner that several American intelligence officers were exposed and are now being tried in absentia in Italy. Allied services in other countries were also compromised, souring future cooperation between the agencies.

I do not rehash this history with any kind of *schadenfreude* but to urge policy makers in the U.S. and here in Europe to read this report with more than just a grain of salt. Many Democrats in Washington and the international media welcomed the agencies' "independence" from the political leadership.

But one must wonder whether, in a democracy, intelligence services are supposed to cultivate their "independence" to the point of opposing the elected political leadership.

And make no mistake, the NIE has little in common with intelligence as it is understood by professionals. Instead, Langley & Co. seem to have decided to carry out their own foreign policy. The report's most controversial conclusion—that Iran ceased its covert nuclear program—is based on the absurd distinction between military and civilian. Iran itself admits—no, boasts—that it continues enriching uranium as part of its "civilian" program. But such enrichment can have only a military purpose.

With this sleight of hand, though, the intelligence services effectively sabotaged the Bush administration's efforts to steer its allies toward a tougher position on Iran. Paris in particular won't be amused about what appears almost like a betrayal. President Nicolas Sarkozy took a great political risk when he turned around French foreign policy and became Europe's leading opponent of a nuclear Iran.

He even warned of a possible armed conflict with Iran—not the most popular thing to do in France.

The agencies say in the report that they don't "know" whether Tehran is considering equipping itself with nuclear arms. These super-spies in the suburbs of Washington do not seem to be the least embarrassed by this admission of incompetence. With their multibillion-dollar budget, one might certainly expect the agencies to "know" these sorts of things.

This admission also betrays a rather naive view of the nature of the Iranian regime. Are the mullahs' intentions really so hard to discern? What everybody "knows"—and not only those in the intelligence community—is that Tehran has made it pretty clear that it wants nuclear arms and that it has very concrete plans for their deployment: to erase Israel from the map. Everybody also "knows" that nuclear arms would make the Islamic Republic almost untouchable, turning it into a regional superpower that could dictate its will on the Gulf states—the world's suppliers of oil and gas. And everybody "knows" that this is an unacceptable prospect for the Gulf countries, practically forcing them to get the bomb as well. Over time the Middle East, not a very stable region, would become completely nuclearized.

The CIA and its covert colleagues could have thought about these realities a bit longer before publishing a document that can only add confusion to an already complex crisis. But to do so would have meant concentrating on intelligence analysis rather than politics. This whole affair would be almost laughable if it weren't so disturbing and dangerous.

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Iran is up to.**

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