

The Administration Is Swinging Wildly on Iran

THE SKEPTICS

Justin Logan | December 20, 2011

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In November, Michael Cohen [wrote](#) an item titled “Leon Panetta Is Losing It,” in which he criticized Secretary Panetta for [stating publicly](#) his view that the cuts to military spending triggered by the failure of the supercommittee would “invite aggression” and transform the U.S. military into a “paper tiger.”

I’m sad to report that Secretary Panetta apparently still hasn’t found it. On the CBS Evening News last night, he [misinformed](#) the American people yet again, this time regarding the threat posed by the Iranian nuclear program:

[Scott] Pelley: So are you saying that Iran can have a nuclear weapon in 2012?

Panetta: It would probably be about a year before they can do it. Perhaps a little less. But one proviso, Scott, is if they have a hidden facility somewhere in Iran that may be enriching fuel.

This looks like a classic “if my aunt were a man, she’d be my uncle” style of argument. What he’s saying here seems to be that, if there’s a hidden enrichment facility, Iran could acquire a nuclear weapon in a year.

Except the [recent IAEA report](#) on Iran that caused such a furor in Washington made it clear that the IAEA had detected no diversion of fissile material and had no evidence of a secret enrichment facility, although it was at pains to point out that Iran was not fully cooperating and consequently the IAEA didn’t feel confident in declaring that there were no unidentified facilities. Or as one of Panetta’s predecessors might have put it, an absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

There may be a secret enrichment facility. But assuming Panetta doesn’t know that there is one, he might just as well point out that, if we imagined that he had a magical power to control the minds of Shiite Muslims, he was confident that Washington could convince

Tehran to forego its nuclear program. It wouldn't be a terribly helpful statement. Wild assumptions rarely make for sound analysis.

Panetta said something else that wasn't smart:

Pelley: If the Israelis decide to launch a military strike to prevent that weapon from being built, what sort of complications does that raise for you?

Panetta: Well, we share the same common concern. The United States does not want Iran to develop a nuclear weapon. That's a red line for us and that's a red line, obviously, for the Israelis. If we have to do it we will deal with it.

Pelley: You just said if we have to do it we will come and do it. What is it?

Panetta: If they proceed and we get intelligence that they are proceeding with developing a nuclear weapon then we will take whatever steps necessary to stop it.

Pelley: Including military steps?

Panetta: There are no options off the table

Pelley: A nuclear weapon in Iran is...

Panetta: Unacceptable.

So Panetta is saying that we'll bomb Iran, or help Israel bomb Iran, if we think that's necessary to prevent it from acquiring nuclear capability. Flat out. On the evening news. The important question here, of course, is if you were Iran, how would you read this sort of statement? If you believed that the United States was a big enough threat that you wanted a nuclear arsenal and then you saw this sort of statement, would you view your concern about American intentions as validated? And if you had spent the last decade watching the different treatment Washington meted out on Muammar Qaddafi and Saddam Hussein, on the one hand, and the North Korean government on the other, who would you rather wind up like? As fate would have it, Les Gelb [interviewed](#) Vice President Biden recently, and brought up this very question:

NEWSWEEK: ...[A]s you know from Iran's point of view, they say, all right, Pakistan crossed [the nuclear] threshold. North Korea crossed that threshold. They're safer now than they would have been otherwise because we can't attack them anymore.

BIDEN: I understand their rationale. But the fact of the matter is that doesn't mean it makes sense for the region and the world to yield to their rationale. And we're going to do everything in our power...

What all of this should be making clear is that there are very few people, including the vice president, who are willing to defend the proposition that Iran ought not to want a

nuclear capability to deter the United States from attacking it. While that reality may be comforting, it is very worrisome that these same public officials continually wag the national ballistic missile in the direction of Tehran, sometimes in the same breath as their concession that Iran is not acting too strangely, given its circumstances.

Image: MCI Chad J. McNeeley