Mischaracterizing the Iran Debate

Peter Feaver asks a question:

Why do people who say military action to destroy the Iranian nuclear program is too hard also insist that it will be easy to contain Iran? Why can't they acknowledge that it would be quite a daunting challenge to contain Iran? This would not preclude them from making the tough call in favor of containment over preventive strikes, though it might undermine the dogmatism of the argument.

Feaver goes on to engage in some pop psychology attempting to explain this curious tendency among advocates of containment and deterrence.

A couple things are interesting here. First is that the opening sentence of Feaver's post reads: "It is almost banal to observe that the Iranian nuclear challenge is a hard policy problem." One of the reasons it is almost banal to observe this is because everyone who opposes war with Iran admits that their preferred solution is itself suboptimal and leaves tough problems on the table.

Secondly, the only item on containing and deterring a nuclear Iran Feaver cites is an AEI report that tries to throw cold water on the idea. That report is probably not the best place to look if one wants to see how people who oppose war with Iran characterize the prospects of containment and deterrence.

For that, one might want to read one of the many articles that advocate containment and deterrence. A few, off the top of my head, include Barry Posen's article, which helpfully deals with Feaver's supposedly unanswered question right up front in the title: "A Nuclear-Armed Iran: A Difficult but Not Impossible Policy Problem." Posen goes into considerable detail in the report describing the problems with constraining a nuclear-armed Iran.

There is <u>my own offering on the subject</u>, which includes this paragraph, and a broader discussion:

Although the preventive war option for dealing with Iran's nuclear program is remarkably unappealing, the prospect of deterrence raises a host of undesirable consequences as well. A nuclear-armed Iran would likely be bolder in advancing its regional political goals, many of which are currently opposed by the United States. It could press for dominance in the Persian Gulf region, which could trigger further proliferation. It would likely attempt to cast itself as the font of anti-Israel sentiment in the Muslim world, and could ratchet up its anti-Israel activities.

Last month at the *National Interest*, Austin Long and Bridge Colby took on the subject, noting that "<u>containing a nuclear Iran would be costly and risky</u>."

I could go on, but I'll stop here. I'm not sure whether to believe that Feaver just doesn't read very widely on the subject or whether he's decided to purposively mischaracterize these scholars' work. Nor am I sure which is more discouraging.