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Driving the Conversation:

If you were president, what specifically would you do or say now to advance the cause of democracy in Iran?

Live reader chat with Robin Wright at 3 p.m.

June 22, 2009

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Roger Pilon, Vice President for Legal Affairs, Cato Institute:
Diplomacy is important, but so is public diplomacy

In responding to the Iranian election crisis, President Obama should have taken as his model Pope John Paul II, Lech Walesa, Margaret Thatcher, and Ronald Reagan. Instead, he looked to George H.W. Bush, whose August 1991 “Chicken Kiev” speech, although aimed at Yugoslavia, was read by his Ukrainian audience as undercutting their own efforts at independence, even as the Soviet Union was collapsing.

To be sure, we should not be seen as promising more to the Iranian opposition than we’re prepared to deliver, or to be taking actions that will enable their oppressors to claim credibly that America is fomenting these protests. But Obama’s initial reaction – that Mousavi’s policies would prove little better than Ahmadinejad’s, and that we needed to be careful not to undermine prospects for a “grand nuclear bargain” – reflected a breathtaking naïveté about the way the world works. It is as if the president had no familiarity with the writings of Solzhenytzin, Sharansky, or Valladares, who told us repeatedly how important it was that we knew what they were suffering. The signs in the streets of Tehran were in English, after all. Seen to be speaking for all of us, the president might have spoken more directly – not later, as he has, but from the outset. Diplomacy is important, but so is public diplomacy, especially in a situation like this.

And that is the lesson going forward. The Bush administration failed to understand the importance of public diplomacy. The Obama administration has too, here, even if it seems to have recovered some in the last few days. Unburdened by the baggage of the previous administration, it can seize this moment. The events of the past week have stripped the Iranian government of whatever legitimacy it may have had – not only in the eyes of the world but, far more important, in the eyes of its own people. When that happened in the Soviet Union, collapse was only a matter of time. But it was not from “grand bargains” with tyranny that that happened – quite the opposite, recall Reykjavik – but from repeated efforts, through public diplomacy, to undermine the legitimacy of the tyrants.

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