- ## Traditional Conservative Blogs

    - 4Pundits
    - Chris Roach
    - Eating Words
    - Gene Healy
    - HitchensBlog
    - Small Is Still Beautiful
    - The American Chesterton Society Blog

- ## WWWTW Conservative Bloggers

    - Apologia
    - Cella's Review
    - Counterrevolutionary Meditations
    - Lydia McGrew
    - Right Reason
    - What's Wrong With The World
    - Zippy Catholic
-     [Search]

- ## Meta

    - Register
    - Log in
    - Entries RSS
    - Comments RSS
    - WordPress.org

Iran's Menacing Mouse-Launching Arsenal

Posted on February 4th, 2010 by Daniel Larison

Digg **Stumble Upon** **Newsvine** **Slashdot** **Mixx** **Diigo** **Google** **Delicious** **Reddit** **Facebook**

> Would Krauthammer contend that Eisenhower's refusal to overthrow the Soviet regime in 1958 was "an embarassing failure?" The Soviets did, after all, actually have nuclear weapons, many of them. The Iranians have none, and have not even mastered the enrichment cycle, let alone the long process toward weaponization. By implying that the only thing that stops the Iranians from immediately nuking New York is their technical capabilities, Krauthammer demonstrates a shocking ignorance of some of the most basic principles of international relations, beginning with deterrence. This makes him a horrible political scientist.
>
> But as a rocket scientist, he's even worse. ~Chris Preble

John Tabin calls this post "bizarre," but it is hard to see how it is bizarre. Preble was responding to a false claim and an irresponsible bit of fearmongering on the part of Charles Krauthammer, and he correctly compared it to the irresponsible, equally baseless fearmongering about a Soviet missile advantage in the late 1950s in the wake of the Sputnik launch. To be fair to Preble, he says that the parallels here are only "modest," but they are there.

Overstating the technical abilities of hostile and rival states is a common tactic that hawks and/or political opportunists have used for decades to attack their domestic opponents and to rile up the public about a threat that doesn't exist or is not nearly as great as is being claimed. They do this for one or more of a variety of reasons. They may be misinformed, desperate to paint their opponents as "weak" on national security, instinctively militaristic, or just paranoid about foreign threats. Krauthammer probably qualifies for all of these. Regardless of why they do it, people who hype threats from so-called "rogue states" are consistently wrong about the technological capabilities of those states, and they are also wrong about the willingness of these states to use the technology that they do have against superior Western military power.

The ability to launch a rocket into space does not readily translate into an ability to put a "nuke in New York," as Krauthammer said. This is not simply "too strong," as Tabin grants. It is wrong. Leaving aside the fact that Iran doesn't have nuclear weapons of any kind and probably remains far away from having them, its missile program is nowhere near being able to produce delivery vehicles for its non-existent nuclear weapons, and the range of its missiles is limited to approximately 1,200 miles. Krauthammer simply erases the numerous, complicated steps between launching a rocket with minimal payload into orbit and successfully arming intercontinental missiles with nuclear warheads. He does this, of course, to create the impression in the minds of his audience that Iran is on the verge of being able to launch a nuclear strike on America, and he wants to add to this fear by suggesting that nothing except regime change can thwart that attack.

As Preble says, Krauthammer's error on technical matters is compounded when he ignores deterrence as the key to checking any future threat from an Iranian nuclear arsenal. Meanwhile, Tabin claims that Preble "seems to assume that the only problem with a nuclear Iran is that it might use its nukes." Of course, that has always been just about the only thing that Iran hawks are worried about in the event that Iran builds a nuclear weapon. As far as the U.S. and our allies are concerned, the only real problem with a nuclear Iran is whether it might use its nukes. A nuclear-armed Iran would be reasonably secure from attack, and it would be able to engage in proxy wars much as it does now. It is probably the case that surprisingly little would change, and it seems possible that the potential costs of escalating conflict could have the effect of limiting conflicts or preventing conflict from breaking out. Regardless, the reality is that Iran does not have and is not close to having nuclear weapons. Even if Iranian missiles were far more advanced right now, there are no nukes with which to arm them.

Tabin concludes:

> If the case against supporting a revolution in Iran is that the Islamic Republic won't be any worse than the USSR, that's not remotely comforting.

Preble doesn't say anything like this. Preble's purpose in making the comparison was to emphasize how dissimilar Iran's current government and the USSR are in terms of power and military strength. Naturally, Tabin thinks that the comparison is meant to equate the two. Preble's point in making the comparison with the USSR in the 1950s is that the USSR was vastly more dangerous and powerful than Iran, it actually possesed nuclear weapons, and it was perceived to have superior technical capabilities. The U.S. government managed to find a way to contain Soviet power and prevent Soviet use of its nuclear weapons short of a revolution toppling the communist regime. Even then deterrence kept the peace, and the West survived without suffering any direct attacks from Soviet forces over the three decades that followed. If deterrence was effective then, how much more effective will it be against a regional power that currently has no nuclear weapons and a limited missile program?

Preble wasn't directly making a case against supporting a revolution in Iran. He was arguing that there would be other ways to prevent Iran from using nuclear weapons in the event that it ever acquired them. That means that Krauthammer's statement that only a revolution in Iran could resolve the nuclear issue was also flat-out wrong.

Filed under: foreign policy, politics

Leave a Reply

You must be logged in to post a comment.

« The Self-Identification Trap