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The Path to War with Iran

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On November 26, 1941, a White House aide named Henry Field was summoned to the office of Franklin Roosevelt's secretary, Grace Tully, for what seemed like a bizarre assignment. Tully instructed Field, one of the president's bright young staffers, to produce, as quickly as possible, the names and addresses of all Japanese Americans, whether born in Japan or America. The assignment was "of the utmost urgency," said Tully, adding, "Use your own judgment to achieve results causing the least possible chance of a breach in security."

This was eleven days before Pearl Harbor. That same day Secretary of State Cordell Hull issued what amounted to an ultimatum to two top Japanese diplomats, ambassador to the U.S. Kichisaburo Nomura and special envoy Saburo Kurusu. "Nomuru," writes John Toland in his book *Infamy: Pearl Harbor and Its Aftermath*, "was too stunned to talk," while Kurusu instantly saw that this would be regarded in Tokyo as "an insult." Having placed Japan under strain of severe economic sanctions, the United States now was showing no willingness to negotiate a way out of the impasse short of a Japanese humiliation. This was the day Roosevelt both ensured war with Japan and began preparing for the incarceration of Japanese-Americans when the war came.

America today is once again on a path to war—this time with Iran—and the road is dotted with many of the same signposts seen in Roosevelt's path to war seventy years ago. Like Roosevelt in his dealings with Japan, President Barack Obama has helped place Iran under severe strain of economic sanctions. Like Roosevelt, he has received from the adversary signals of flexibility in the search for a mutually satisfactory solution. Like Roosevelt, Obama has rebuffed those overtures. Roosevelt was under pressure from Britain's prime minister Winston Churchill to hang tough, and Obama is under similar pressure from Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu.

There may be one big difference, but we can't know for sure. While the historical record shows clearly that Roosevelt actually wanted war with Japan, it isn't clear this is Obama's desired outcome. If it is, his actions make sense. If not, his approach seems reckless.

For there should be no mistaking the reality that the United States and Iran are on a collision course, as reflected in the ongoing negotiations between the so-called P5+1 (the United States, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany) and Iran. The next session is set for June 18–19 in Moscow, and this session isn't likely to lead to a blowup, not least because Obama has a large political incentive to keep the talks going at least through the November election. But the last session in Baghdad seemed to indicate that, if there is indeed any prospect for a negotiated settlement, Obama and the other P5+1 powers aren't demonstrating any interest in exploring it. To understand this dynamic, it is helpful to review events leading up to the next negotiating session.

Any such review should take into account the recent writings of Seyed Hossein Mousavian. The former spokesman for Iran's nuclear negotiations team and also Iranian ambassador to Germany for seven years, Mousavian now is a research fellow at Princeton. He was arrested by Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on charges of espionage in 2007 but was acquitted by the country's judiciary. He is the author of a recently published book called *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir*.

In his writings and public speaking, Mousavian disputes those in the West who declare Iran is bent on developing nuclear weapons. As he said in an interview with the Middle East Institute, "I am confident that Iran is not seeking to have nuclear weapons."

Indeed, in the spring of 2005, Iran, in negotiations with European powers, offered to convert its enriched uranium to fuel rods, which would have precluded the country from using it for nuclear weapons. That was rejected by Britain at America's insistence, says Mousavian. Later, in 2010 and 2011, Iran offered to limit its enrichment to 5 percent if the West would provide fuel rods for peaceful nuclear uses. Shortly thereafter, Russia put forth a "step-by-step" plan designed to break the impasse. Both times the United States balked, leading Russia's then prime minister Vladimir Putin to suggest publicly that the West's real design was regime change in Iran (a prospect guaranteed to generate powerful nuclear incentives in Tehran).

Against this backdrop, Mousavian sees a possible avenue of peace. Iran is willing to curtail its nuclear program and accept transparency measures, he says, so long as the West recognizes Iran's right to enrich uranium up to 5 percent, which is allowed under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, of which Iran is a signatory. This should satisfy Americans who want to see from Iran some form of confidence-building gesture. But he adds that Iran wants confidence-building gestures as well, and these should be in the form of some gradual lifting of sanctions.

Under this concept, Iran and its negotiating adversaries could craft a step-by-step process designed to build confidence on both sides and reach an accommodation based on Iran giving up nuclear-weapon ambitions but retaining an ability to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. "We take a step, you take a step," says Mousavian.

Following the Istanbul talks on April 14, he adds, he thought the parties had agreed to such an approach, but in the May 23 Baghdad session the West seemed to backtrack, refusing to accept either Iran's right to enrich for peaceful purposes or its own onus to accept some symbolic lifting of sanctions to authenticate the step-by-step concept. It didn't help that Netanyahu promptly dismissed the session as giving Iran a "freebie" and reiterated his resolve that Iran should be stopped from any enrichment at all.

If Obama would accept the concessions suggested by Mousavian, could a peaceful solution ensue? The question is impossible to answer absent an actual diplomatic effort to find out. But, as Mousavian says, "Any reasonable reciprocity based on a step-by-step plan will require a gradual lifting of sanctions, otherwise reaching a compromise will be almost impossible."

The reason is the same one that Cordell Hull's ultimatum to the Japanese diplomats ended prospects for peace between the United States and Japan in November 1941. Negotiations between nations that generate ultimatums seldom lead to peace. National honor is too highly valued a commodity for that. Thus, as America moves away from any exploration of the Mousavian formula, the two nations become more and more locked onto their collision course.

After all, Obama already has taken off the policy table any consideration of a deterrence strategy against a nuclear-armed Iran. Hence, if Iran can't be dissuaded from its current course and Obama adheres to his warning (as he must) that he will take military steps to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran, then there will be war. It seems that the Mousavian formula represents the last hope for a peaceful solution.

After Hull's session with Nomura and Kurusu, he got a call from War Secretary Henry Stimson, who wanted to

know how it went. "I handed the note to the Japs," said Hull—"almost casually," as Toland relates it. "I have washed my hands of it, and it is now in the hands of you and [Navy Secretary Frank] Knox—the Army and the Navy." Truer words were never spoken. They are words worth pondering by those involved in U.S. diplomacy with Iran.

Robert W. Merry is editor of [The National Interest](#) [3] and the author of books on American history and foreign policy. His next book, [Where They Stand: The American Presidents in the Eyes of Voters and Historians](#) [4], is due out on June 26 from Simon & Schuster.

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