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Clinton's Loose War Talk

by Sheldon Richman
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When President Obama spoke before the American Israel Public Affairs Committee some weeks ago, he admonished those who engaged in “loose talk of war” about Iran. Apparently, his secretary of state, Hillary Rodham Clinton, didn’t get the memo.

The Associated Press reported this week,

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton made clear Saturday that time is running out for diplomacy over Iran's nuclear program and said talks aimed at preventing Tehran from acquiring a nuclear weapon would resume in mid-April. With speculation over a possible U.S. or Israel military attack adding urgency to the next round of discussions in Istanbul set for April 13, Clinton said Iran's “window of opportunity” for a peaceful resolution “will not remain open forever.”

She also expressed doubt about whether Iran has any intention of negotiating a solution that satisfies the U.S., Israel and other countries that believe Iran is trying to develop nuclear weapons.

That’s another memo Clinton seems not to have received. Both American and Israeli intelligence say that Iran has neither started to build a nuclear weapon nor even decided to do so in the future. Both also regard the Iranian government as a “rational actor.” (The American news media occasionally reports this, but then goes back to stating, as though it were uncontroversial, that Iran is building a nuclear arsenal.)

So why the conflicting signals from the U.S. government? This conflict can be seen in Obama's own statements. While he calls for diplomacy and warns against loose war talk, he has imposed harsh economic sanctions that make the daily lives of average Iranians miserable, has rejected "containment," and boasted that he doesn't "bluff."

If Iran is not building a nuclear bomb, if it has not decided to do so, and if Obama wants to use diplomacy to discuss Iran's uranium-enrichment program (which its government says is for peaceful purposes), why is he pushing sanctions designed to bring the Iranian economy down? Wouldn't it make more sense, if there is really something to negotiate about, for Obama to treat the Iranian regime with respect?

The saber rattlers will say that sanctions are needed to get Iran to the negotiating table. But that's an evasion. The official experts, as well as others, say no bomb is being built. Iran is doing what it is free to do under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty — enriching uranium for medical and energy purposes. It is subjected to inspections and its uranium is under seal by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

There is no constructive purpose to the sanctions and war talk. Clinton aggravates an already dangerous situation when she talks ominously about windows closing and clocks running. She sounds bent on war, with Obama just a bit less so.

Why?

Two reasons suggest themselves. It's an election year. The Republican presidential candidate (unless it's Ron Paul) can be expected to portray Obama as insufficiently bloodthirsty. Mitt Romney hopes we'll ignore Obama's expansion of the criminal drone war in Pakistan and Somalia, his due-process-free assassination of Americans in Yemen, his autocratic intervention in Libya, his continuation of the brutal occupation of Afghanistan, and his signing legislation to codify the president's power to detain even American citizens indefinitely without charge or trial. Romney's foreign-policy team are some of the same people who gave us the lie-based invasion of Iraq, which was responsible for the deaths of well over a million people and the creation of more than four million refugees. Word is that the presumptive candidate plans to hammer Obama on his handling of foreign affairs. According to the *Washington Post*, "In his speeches, Romney has proposed a more confrontational approach to China, Russia, Iran and other countries."

The Obama campaign may have calculated that they can't afford to look weak on Iran. Yet this is not the only reason. Israel's top officials appear to have decided that an attack on Iran is imperative. But without U.S. help, Israel's air force can do no more than set Iran's (peaceful) nuclear program back for a brief time. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu continues his threatening talk, supported by the Israel lobby in the United States. Israel-partisans in the U.S. media routinely channel Netanyahu's war talk to the American public in order to build sympathy for the nonexistent Iranian threat to Israel.

Obama says he wants peace not war. When will he begin to act like it?