

niium at Natanz. Iran denied the weapons charge and asserted that the samples taken by IAEA came from nuclear equipment that was contaminated when it was bought over a decade ago from Pakistan for civilian purposes. Last summer, the IAEA came up with a conciliatory report that confirmed this particular assertion, and its director-general, Mohamed El-Baradei, said that Iran would allow the agency to monitor her activities. Ahmadinejad's subsequent refusal to allow inspections and his provocative debut at the United Nations reflected Iran's new ideological climate, in which nuclear identity is seen as consistent with the country's right of passage from technological adolescence to the status of a regional power that commands respect and demands equal treatment.

What can the United States do about Iran? An all-out "Operation Iranian Freedom" is not a rational option. Even with our unsurpassed military capabilities, the United States would not be able to mount a full-scale invasion. Iran is much bigger than Iraq—1.65 million square miles—with three times the population (over 70 million). The Tehran regime, dominated by Shiite clerics, is authoritarian, but it is not devoid of a broad popular base; it is certainly not a closed autocracy as Saddam's Iraq was. When Iraq attacked Iran in 1980, the regime in Tehran could count on considerable popular support on nationalist, as well as religious, grounds. Millions of Iranians would resist an American attack with equal enthusiasm today.

If various E.U. and U.N. attempts to deal with Iran by diplomatic means fail—i.e., if Tehran does not give up on uranium enrichment—a limited military action would be more likely. A sustained air campaign is possible, regardless of the ongoing commitment of the ground forces in Iraq, because America's air power is not committed there. A disabled Iran could be further crippled by internal dissent, especially if the United States were to support Azeri separatists in the northwest and in the Iranian part of Kurdistan. Iran's oil production would be disrupted, but much of its supplies are destined for China, which is increasingly being perceived in Washington as America's main long-term rival.

The cost would be prohibitive, however. Keeping Iraq's Shiites cooperative is a key element in the U.S. exit strategy. An American attack on their coreligionists across the Shat-el-Arab could prompt

a Shiite uprising in southern Iraq. Even the rise of a low-intensity insurgency in Basra or Karbala would be a major setback to Iraq's elusive stabilization. If Iran's output of some four million barrels per day is not only disrupted but completely halted, a sudden rise in oil prices could trigger a worldwide recession. If, in addition, Iran blocks the Strait of Hormuz, through which most of the oil from the Gulf passes on its way to the Far East and Europe, the global energy crisis would make the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War pale by comparison.

It is far better to employ bilateral diplomacy and offer U.S. security guarantees to Iran. Washington should offer to refrain from its "Axis of Evil" rhetoric in return for a clear "no nukes" commitment from Ahmadinejad. Multilateral initiatives involving the European Union will be drawn out and futile without a direct American approach to Tehran. Iranian leaders are aptly playing the nationalist card with the nuclear issue, evoking Iran's struggle to nationalize her oil industry in the early 1950's. Ignoring the national-pride aspect would lead the United States to repeat the mistake the British made in 1951, when they turned a question of oil royalties into a groundswell of Iranian nationalism. A reasonable deal could also entail allowing Iran to enrich uranium to the extent needed for power generation, acknowledging her right to this technology, provided that she keeps the entire nuclear program under international oversight.

Either way, the United States should not risk a new, open-ended and dangerous commitment in the Middle East over Iran's nuclear program. Iran is simply seeking to do what several other regional powers—notably Israel, India, and Pakistan—have already done. Her security concerns, viewed objectively, are real. There are U.S. troops in Iraq to the west, in Afghanistan to the northeast, and U.S. Air Force bases in the former Soviet Central Asia to the north. Pakistan, Iran's eastern neighbor, is inherently unstable, potentially hostile, and armed with nuclear bombs. Iran's leaders are understandably loath to rely on imported armaments again. They desire nuclear arms primarily as a means of deterring external threats. The notion that Iran would seek to threaten America with a half-dozen devices that she may build over the next decade—and with no prospect of developing long-range delivery vehicles—is simply not credible.

Israel may have more reason to feel threatened by Iran's plans, but it should be up to Israel to consider her options and act accordingly. She may well decide on a robust response reminiscent of her action in Iraq, with all the attendant risks and uncertainties. She should not expect the United States to do the job on her behalf, however.

Rather than contemplate military action against Iran, the United States would be well advised to look beyond the nuclear issue to our longer-term regional objectives and interests. As Amin Saikal noted in the *International Herald Tribune* recently, a viable resolution of the nuclear row depends very much on how the parties can come to terms politically:

If Washington recognized Tehran's Islamic regime, stopped constantly threatening Iran, and agreed to controls on weapons of mass destruction across the region—including Israel's—it would make considerable progress in dealing with the nuclear issue.

The problem is that Washington has never contemplated subjecting Israel to the same constraints that apply to other countries in the region. This needs to change. With the end of the Cold War, the key justification for U.S. micromanagement of Middle Eastern affairs has disappeared. America should develop and pursue regional policies based on her own goals. This has not been the case for more than a generation, during which influential interest groups have driven U.S. policy in the greater Middle East. The price of converting Middle Eastern strategy into another form of domestic politics has been high. It has included two wars with Iraq in just over a decade, followed by that country's open-ended military occupation and an ever-worsening guerrilla conflict. Suicidal terrorism has reached our shores, and the "War on Terror" is not going well.

America can ill afford to add "the war in Iran" to the list, and she has no compelling strategic or moral reason to do so.

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CELEBRITY

Pop Idols

by Christopher Sandford

The English middle orders from Ruskin onward have had an inbred prejudice against America. True, they may dress like mutant versions of Kurt Cobain and bundle themselves and their cloaca-tongued broods off to Disney World, but when you say "U.S.A.," much of the professional class still thinks of headlines like "NEW JERSEY BABY BORN WITH THREE HEADS" or, more topically, "BUSH LEFT ME ON A ROOF TO DIE." Indeed, there are few sights and sounds more British than that of some lucky H2 work-permit holder yapping at the heels of the host country while simultaneously enjoying her hospitality. Many grand pronouncements about America's decline made by visiting rock stars would seem to illustrate this point.

Take, for instance, Sir Paul McCartney. Nothing that follows is intended as an attack or slur on McCartney or his family, or as a reason not to buy several copies of my new book on him. Unlike some of his ex-colleagues, I would not dream of questioning Sir Paul's talent, drive, restless creativity, exquisite taste, philanthropy—notably the last, which has matured strikingly since the day in 1968 when he announced, "Starvation in India doesn't worry me one bit, not one iota." In the years since, he has variously embraced, among others, Friends of the Earth, Live Aid, War Child, Greenpeace, Adopt-a-Minefield, the National Endowment for Science and the Arts, and sundry nuclear-disarmament and debt-cancellation groups, as well as being a thrilling ranter on the subject of animal rights. (The historical role of megalomania in this last obsession, Hitler being the obvious example, is under-researched and would surely make a Ph.D. thesis.) In fact, few of the crises chronicled daily on CNN—whether about Iraq and Iran, or AIDS and global warming and racial strife in Louisiana—are entirely free of McCartney's empathy. To illustrate the general perception of the man, one need go no further than the anonymous fan-

page correspondent who writes that "Sir Paul has achieved monumental fame as a uniter and healer," not to mention as the "conscience of his generation" and tireless foe both of "Western cruelty against innocent creatures," and (surely a *non sequitur*) "the evil Murdoch press."

Readers may feel that I have scoured the flakier end of the internet for such a rich example. But no. There are literally scores of pieces similarly extolling the ex-Beatle's musically assisted therapy of his audiences, not to mention the audiences themselves, who are flocking to his current tour in record numbers. By all accounts, McCartney's latest concerts continue to soar far above the level of other 1960's antiques with their vaudeville routines for the curious and the disturbed. If you are under, say, 75, and have any sort of an ear for a pop melody, then he's your man. But "monumental fame as a uniter and healer"? Take McCartney's moderately successful 1970 single, today an anthem, entitled "Let It Be." That's the first, second, and third line of its chorus. The fourth is, "Yeah, let it be." Might the attraction of hearing him sing this possibly be anecdotal, as well as to do with the appeal of moving to a rhythm at the same time as everyone else? As thousands of Red Army conscripts staged parades, lifting posters of the Comrade Leader and lowering them simultaneously, so people clap along and wave lighters during this particular number.

Other than the tribal sense of community, what does one get for a \$250 McCartney ticket—for which, incidentally, you can expect to pay three or four times as much from those ever-helpful "brokers"? A couple of hours of tightly choreographed nostalgia, Sir Paul himself retaining such a sober, businesslike air that his Hofner guitar might as well be a briefcase. Indeed, he has taken the opportunity not so much to evoke the 60's counterculture as to pitch financial planning on behalf of Boston-based Fidelity Investments. The privately held fund giant has signed up the conscience of his generation "to show that we, too, can help people achieve their dreams," says Claire Huang, Fidelity's executive vice president for advertising.

These latest Beatles-by-proxy concerts have added a tidy sum, then, to McCartney's already capacious vaults. And good

luck to him. But when a billionaire shakes the collecting tin, however inadvertently, on behalf of those crooks, charlatans, and top-of-the-range Mercedes owners governing much of Africa—as he did at last summer's Live 8 event—harangues us, once again, about our dining habits (carnivores being not so much wrong as morally faulty), and then hokes it up with Fidelity, he wouldn't, perhaps, seem to be a man whose first anxiety is self-effacement. Once the conscience of his generation sells mutual funds, what's the generation to think? And why the mass investment in McCartney's own pension plan, particularly just as those winter heating bills roll in? A couple earning \$30,000 per year, after tax, would have to spend a week's salary in order to watch the two-hour concert without the aid of binoculars. It must be those peerless tunes, and possibly, too, the publicity machine—a little like an Abrams tank with go-faster stripes—that drives the whole enterprise forward.

The conflict between historical truth and the more excitable end of mass perception has been a central theme in the career of another premium-ticket act currently touring these shores, the Rolling Stones. Of "Sweet Neocon," a song from the group's new CD, *A Bigger Bang*, we read that

We play your music in rock 'n' roll marching bands, as we tattoo "JAIL BUSH" on the bloated bellies of the war criminal and his thugs . . . A clarion call to end the tyrant's reign of terror, error, and stupidity . . . An anthem for creat[ing] a new society from the ashes of our fires.

How very different from the home lives of our own dear Stones. This is a band, it should be noted, with a nearly perfect, 43-year track record of political apathy. Sir Mick Jagger's first ex-wife thought so much of the matter that she once publicly challenged him to write a song with a "serious message." His response was a tune called "It's Only Rock n' Roll (But I Like It)." "Sweet Neocon" itself offers lyrics of almost masterly vacuity, relying instead on crashing blues-guitar chords, wailing harmonica, and a large degree of critical goodwill. (It is, perhaps, distinguished by its use of the word *Hallibur-*