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The Iranian “Plot”

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First, a simple rule: utter absurdity in allegations leveled by the US government is no bar to a deferential hearing in our nation’s major conduits of official opinion. Suppose the CIA leaks a secret national security review concluding that the moon is actually made of cheese, and the Chinese are planning to send up a pair of gigantic bio-engineered rats to breed in numbers sufficient to eat the cheese and thus sabotage US plans for Missile Defense radar deployment on the moon’s dark side.

The headlines will initially proclaim “Doubts on Chinese Rat Threat Widespread. Many scoff.” The lead paragraphs in news stories in the New York Times, Washington Post and Wall Street Journal will quote the scoffers, but then “balance” will mandate respectful quotation from “intelligence sources”, faculty professors, think tank “experts” and the like, all eager to dance to the government’s tune: “Many say ‘rat scenario ‘plausible’” etc etc. Lo and behold, by the end of a couple of days of such news stories, the Chinese rat plot is firmly ensconced as a credible proposition. News reports then turn to respectful discussion of the US government’s options in confronting and routing the Chinese rat threat: “Vice President says ‘all options are on the table’” etc. For verification, merely study the news stories about the Iranian “plot” in the major papers across the past three days.

Even by the forgiving standards of American credulity, the supposed Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the US is spectacularly ludicrous. Why would Iran want to kill the Saudi envoy – the mild-mannered functionary, Adel al-Jubeir? I could understand an inclination to dispose of the irksome Prince Bandar who held the job for 22 years, from 1983 to 2005 – simply in the spirit of “change”. But to kill any ambassador – particularly a Saudi ambassador – is to invite lethal retaliation, even war. Iran doesn’t want war with the US.

Manssor J. Arbabsiar, an Iranian-American used car salesman from Corpus Christi, Texas, has been indicted as the chief conspirator working for Iranian intelligence. He is charged with promising to pay \$1.5 million to Los Zetas – one of the Mexican drug cartels – to kill the Saudi ambassador at a restaurant in Washington.

The FBI claims that Arbabsiar told the Drug Enforcement Agency’s informant – posing as a high-ranking member of Los Zetas – that it would be “no big deal” if many others died at the restaurant, possibly including United States senators. He also proposed bombing the Israeli embassy.

If even one US senator died in a terrorist bombing in Washington, if anything larger than a firecracker detonated outside the Israeli embassy, US bombers would be raining high explosive on Iranian targets within 24 hours. Why would Iran want to invite such a response?

Gareth Porter points out on our site this weekend that the whole “plot” has the familiar aroma of an FBI sting in which the most outlandish propositions are actually voiced by the DEA informant to Arbabsiar. The supposed plot is certainly wreathed in incidental grandiose absurdities: a side deal between the Quds Force, part of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), and Los Zetas to smuggle vast shipments of opium from the Middle East to Mexico, and plans to bomb the Saudi and Israeli Embassies in Argentina.

To repeat: Iran doesn’t want war with the US. Quite the reverse. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad recently tried to refloat the Tehran Research Reactor nuclear fuel swap. He proposed that Iran suspend production of some uranium-enrichment activities in exchange for fuel supplies from the United States. On September 29 the International Herald Tribune ran an op-ed piece saying the proposal was well worth consideration by the US government. All such hopes of a warming in relations have now been snuffed out, most vigorously by Obama on

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Thursday, endorsing the Attorney General Holder’s wild allegations and threatening ferocious new sanctions against Iran.

There are two powers in the Middle East that most certainly do want war, or a deepening rift between the US and Iran – namely Saudi Arabia and Israel. And we should not forget the cultish Iranian MEK, beloved by many on Capitol Hill.

Iranian intelligence is famously efficient at hiding its tracks. Though many believe that it was the Iranians who blew up PanAm flight 103 in 1988 – in retaliation for the downing of an Iranian civilian airliner by the US Navy ship, the Vincennes – no convincing trail has ever come to light. Yet it is supposedly Iranian intelligence that wired \$100,000 to the used car salesman, using a known Quds bank account. If the bid was a false flag operation mounted by the Saudis or Israelis, an open transfer of money would be one obvious tactic.

The US has made swift use of dubious “plots” in the not-so-distant past. In 1981 it flourished charges of a Libyan “hit squad” entering the US through the border tunnel between the Canadian town of Windsor to Detroit, with a plan to assassinate newly elected President Ronald Reagan. No evidence was ever offered for this accusation but it kindled animosities that culminated five years later with the US raid on Tripoli, aiming to assassinate Col Gaddafi in his compound.

In April 1993 former president G.H.W. Bush was visiting Kuwait to commemorate the victory over Saddam in the Gulf War. Detection by the Kuwaitis of a plot to kill him with a car bomb was announced. The FBI duly declared that the wiring of the bomb indicated that the bomb-makers belonged to Iraqi intelligence.

In June 1993 Madeleine Albright, US ambassador to the UN, denounced the plot in the Security Council and a day later President Clinton ordered the firing of 23 Tomahawk cruise missiles at the HQ of Iraqi intelligence in Baghdad. One of the missiles landed in a Baghdad suburb and killed Layla al-Attar, one of Iraq’s leading artists. This set the tone for relations during the Clinton years.

There have also been some spectacular cases of gullibility on the part of supposedly seasoned US intelligence operatives and high military commanders.

A year ago General Petraeus and the US high command in Afghanistan placed great confidence in Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, allegedly a senior Taliban commander empowered to make peace proposals. The US negotiators and Afghan officials were initially suspicious of Mansour’s credentials but their doubts soon melted. According to a New York Times report, “Several steps were taken to establish the man’s real identity; after the first meeting, photos of him were shown to Taliban detainees who were believed to know Mr. Mansour. They signed off, the Afghan leader said.”

It turned out that Mansour, given quite large sums of money by the Americans, was a freelance impostor. Note that in the case of the Iranian plot, the FBI says that Manssor J. Arbabsiar correctly identified a known Quds Force officer from a photo array.

The question is why the US government should nail its colors so firmly to the mast of this purported Iranian assassination plot. On two other occasions the US made passionate commitments at the UN to concocted evidence – with both used as levers to launch wars.

The first was US Secretary of State Colin Powell’s unveiling to the UN in February of 2003 of the infamous dossier of

entirely bogus evidence that Iraq had a huge arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. The second was the allegation by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and US ambassador to the UN Susan Rice, in February of this year, that Gaddafi was committing crimes against humanity up to and including genocide against his own people – charges decisively refuted by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Absurdity, as noted above, is not a decisive factor. Once the DOJ launched its Complaint, the accusations are official and immune to reasoned demolition. Iran doesn't want war with the US. But how far will the US go in its response, led as it is by a weak president entirely committed to using the “war on terror” to buttress his bid for reelection.

Our Latest Newsletter

Let me give you some opening paragraphs from one of the greatest descriptions of farm work ever committed to paper:

Farm work is hard not only in the sense of being skilled but also in the sense of requiring toil, exertion, and extended physical effort. When arriving in the early morning to begin work, Pablo Camacho would often say, “Ya llegamos al campo de la batalla” – “Now we arrive at the field of battle.” Although intending to provoke a smile, Camacho was not being ironic. Most people who have worked in the fields say that it is the hardest work they have ever done. It is hard to put up with the inevitable pain and physical exhaustion, to last until the end of the row, the end of the day, the week, the season. “To last” is not quite the right word. The right word is a Spanish one, *aguantar*: to endure, to bear, to put up with.

Pablo Camacho was proud of his ability to *aguantar*, even arrogant about it, often claiming that he never felt pain while he was working. That is a pose that a lot of farmworkers assume, even among themselves. At work, no one complains about pain. Camacho believed that the ability to put up with pain was part of the Mexican national character, especially evident in sports. Like many farmworkers, he was an avid boxing fan. He could name all the boxing champions in the lighter divisions from the 1930s to the 1970s, as well as recount the ways Mexican fighters had been denied championship opportunities. Mexicans were the best boxers in the world, he argued, especially in their ability to withstand punishment. They were also good marathon runners and long-distance bicycle racers, he said, sports in which endurance and patience are the essential virtues.

But Mexicans do not have an exclusive franchise on the ability to tolerate hard work. Endurance is a trait of slaves and the oppressed in general, and also characteristic of peasants and other agricultural people – whether free or unfree. Agriculture by its very nature requires patience. Farmworkers have to wait for nature to do her work. They must plant, water, and wait. Weed and wait. And, finally, after enduring the wait, they may harvest.

Physical labor has received bad reviews since people began to write. It is Adam's curse in the Old Testament. Aristotle contended that “occupations are ... the most servile in which there is greatest use of the body.” The dynamic relationship between the brain and the hand was ripped asunder by early philosophers, leaving two separate activities: valued intellectual labor (suitable for free men) and devalued manual labor (suitable for women and slaves). This philosophical predisposition against the work of the body had its greatest worldly triumph in the development of capitalism and the factory system. As Marx so passionately chronicled, English factories destroyed English handicrafts. What he called “modern industry” – machines built by other machines strung together in a continuous process of production, where laborers are “mere appendages” to the machinery – replaced the earlier system of production that “owed its existence to personal strength and personal skill, and depended on the muscular development, the keenness of sight, and the cunning of the hand.”

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The cunning of the hand, what farmworkers call *maña*, remains the basis of California farm work as surely as it is the basis of a major league pitcher’s job, or a skilled craftsman’s. Many farmworker jobs are not only hard to do but hard to learn, often requiring years to master, and skills typically are passed from one generation to the next. Farmworkers use hand tools: knives, hoes, clippers, pruners. They do not tend machines or have to keep up with an assembly line.

I’m quoting from Frank Bardacke’s brilliant, long-awaited *Trampling Out the Vintage: César Chávez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers* which will be published by Verso later this month. I read an earlier draft of Frank’s book in manuscript and the chapter, “The Work Itself” bowled me over with its marvelous descriptions and observation. Frank himself worked for three years in the fields of the Pajaro Valley around Watsonville.

When Frank asked me for an endorsement of the book, I wrote “There’s so much marvelous stuff in Frank Bardacke’s book that’s simply not been done before. At the book’s core are the men and women who pick the crops in California’s fields and orchards. Bardacke gives those people, mostly seen only in distant fields, a huge presence, one crackling with political vitality: those surges the UFW had no idea were coming; those moments when a strike spread like wildfire across the fields. Here are the farm workers, their skill and endurance, the world they built among themselves, the ways they shaped the history of the UFW. It is their story—refreshingly, sympathetically, and beautifully told—that makes this book stand apart and will make it stand forever.”

In our current newsletter we run most of the chapter “The Work Itself.” I hope you get the book. If you want a taste of its qualities, read our exclusive excerpt.

Also in this newsletter we continue our series on the Obama Record. Linn Washington Jr. contributes a terrific piece, “Black Backlash Against Obama.”

Post-scriptum :

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