

FIVE MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT

The War Is Coming, No Matter How Hard We Try to Evade It

The Intellectual Activist (TIA) Daily

August 10, 2006

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I have noticed a recent trend in war commentary, starting a few weeks after the beginning of the current conflict in Lebanon. The trend began with a series of analogies between recent events and the events of the 1930s, leading up to World War II.

In the August 2 Washington Times, for example, Kenneth Timmerman referred to the Lebanon War as "Islamofascism's 1936." Just as the Spanish Civil War that began in that year was a preview of World War II—the 1937 bombing of Guernica was Hermann Goering's test of the ability of aerial bombing to destroy cities—so Timmerman argues that the Lebanon War is a preview of a larger conflict: "Iran...is testing the international community's response, as it prepares for a future war." (Jack Wakeland made a similar point in the July 19 edition of TIA Daily.)

For others on the pro-war right, the preferred analogy is 1938, the year in which Western appeasement of Hitler emboldened him to further attacks. That year's Munich Agreement—the "diplomatic solution" to a German-fomented crisis in Czechoslovakia, abandoned Czechoslovakia to Hitler in exchange for promises that British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain claimed would guarantee "peace for our time." On August 7, the headline of a Washington Times editorial asked: is the Bush administration's proposed diplomatic solution for Lebanon an attempt to secure "Peace in Our Time?"

Over at National Review Online, Jonah Goldberg picks 1939, wondering if Israel will fall to a Sunni-Shiite pact, just as Poland fell to a Nazi-Soviet pact, while John Batchelor, writing in the New York Sun, is more ecumenical, citing analogies to 1936, 1938, 1939, and even America in 1941.

British commentator David Pryce-Jones, in his blog at National Review Online, sums up the general sense of things:

I have often wondered what it would have been like to live through the Thirties. How would I have reacted to the annual Nuremberg Party rallies, the rants against the Jews, and Hitler's foreign adventures which the democracies did nothing to oppose, the occupation of the Rhineland and Austria, Nazi support for Franco in the Spanish civil war, and the rest of it. Appeasement was then considered wise, and has only become a dirty word with hindsight....

Now Iran is embarked on foreign adventures in Iraq and Syria and Lebanon. It is

engaged on all-out armament programs, and is evidently hard at work developing the nuclear weapon that will give it a dimension of power that Hitler did not have.... Appeasement is again considered wise.

What these commentators are picking up is not an exact parallel to any one event of the 1930s—hence their scattershot of historical analogies. Instead, what they are picking up is a sense of the overall direction of world events: we are clearly headed toward a much larger, bloodier conflict in the Middle East, but no one in the West wants to acknowledge it, prepare for it, or begin to fight it.

The phrase that best captures this sense of foreboding struck me in a long and interesting account of wartime Israel by Bernard-Henri Levy.

Zivit Seri is a tiny woman, a mother, who speaks with clumsy, defenseless gestures as she guides me through the destroyed buildings of Bat Galim—literally “daughter of the waves,” the Haifa neighborhood that has suffered most from the shellings. The problem, she explains, is not just the people killed: Israel is used to that. It’s not even the fact that here the enemy is aiming not at military objectives but deliberately at civilian targets—that, too, is no surprise. No, the problem, the real one, is that these incoming rockets make us see what will happen on the day—not necessarily far off—when the rockets are ones with new capabilities: first, they will become more accurate and be able to threaten, for example, the petrochemical facilities you see there, on the harbor, down below; second, they may come equipped with chemical weapons that can create a desolation compared with which Chernobyl and Sept. 11 together will seem like a mild prelude.

For that, in fact, is the situation. As seen from Haifa, this is what is at stake in the operation in southern Lebanon. Israel did not go to war because its borders had been violated. It did not send its planes over southern Lebanon for the pleasure of punishing a country that permitted Hezbollah to construct its state-within-a-state. It reacted with such vigor because the Iranian President Ahmadinejad’s call for Israel to be wiped off the map and his drive for a nuclear weapon came simultaneously with the provocations of Hamas and Hezbollah. The conjunction, for the first time, of a clearly annihilating will with the weapons to go with it created a new situation. We should listen to the Israelis when they tell us they had no other choice anymore. We should listen to Zivit Seri tell us, in front of a crushed building whose concrete slabs are balancing on tips of twisted metal, that, for Israel, it was five minutes to midnight.

It is, indeed, “five minutes to midnight”—not just for Israel, but for the West. The time is very short now before we will have to confront Iran. The only question is how long we let events spin out of our control, and how badly we let the enemy hit us before we begin fighting back.

We can’t avoid this war, because Iran won’t let us avoid it. That is the real analogy to the 1930s. Hitler came to power espousing the goal of German world

domination, openly promising to conquer neighboring nations through military force and to persecute and murder Europe's Jews. He predicted that the free nations of the world would be too weak—too morally weak—to stand up to him, and European and American leaders spent the 1930s reinforcing that impression. So Hitler kept advancing—the militarization of the Rhineland in 1936, the Spanish bombing campaign in 1937, the annexation of Austria and the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1938, the invasion of Poland in 1939—until the West finally, belatedly decided there was no alternative but war.

That is what is playing out today. Iran's theocracy has chosen, as the nation's new president, a religious fanatic who believes in the impending, apocalyptic triumph of Islam over the infidels. He openly proclaims his desire to create an Iranian-led Axis that will unite the Middle East in the battle against America, and he proclaims his desire to "wipe Israel off the map," telling an audience of Muslim leaders that "the main solution" to the conflict in Lebanon is "the elimination of the Zionist regime." (Perhaps this would be better translated as Ahmadinejad's "final solution" to the problem of Israel.)

Like Hitler, Ahmadinejad regards the free nations of the world as fading "sunset" powers, too morally weak to resist his legions of Muslim fanatics. And when we hesitate to kill Muqtada al-Sadr in Iraq, when we pressure Israel to rein in its attacks on Hezbollah, when we pander to the anti-Jewish bigotry of the "Muslim street"—we reinforce his impression of our weakness.

The result has been and will be the same: Iran will press its advantage and continue to attack our interests in the Middle East and beyond. The only question is when we will finally decide that Iran's aggression has gone too far and its theocratic regime needs to be destroyed.

But the delay has been and will be costly. When the wider war comes, Lebanon won't be the only nation plunged into turmoil. Iraq will also get much worse, since Sadr is almost certain to lead a Shiite uprising against American troops in support of his masters in Tehran. And the terrorist plot uncovered today in Britain should cause us to recollect that Iran has a long-standing global terrorist network that it could use to strike in Europe and even in America.

Writers on the pro-war right (along with a very small number of pro-war liberals) sense that this war cannot be avoided, and they are beginning to prepare themselves—and their readers—to fight. Few of them are yet prepared to say that we need to strike immediately at Iran, though a few are beginning to contemplate this necessity. (See Joel Rosenberg in today's National Review Online.)

The left also senses the impending war, but they have a very different reaction. Their favorite analogy is not the prelude to World War II, but the beginning of World War I.

It is widely acknowledged that World War II was made far more horrible by the years in which free nations appeased Hitler, allowing him to strengthen his armies before he took over Europe. That analogy lends itself to one conclusion: the sooner we attack Iran, the better.

World War I, by contrast, is largely regarded as the result of a giant, tragic mistake, a failure of diplomacy in which the great powers of Europe, seeking a network of alliances that would guarantee a "balance of power," instead trapped themselves into a senseless war. This is the use made of the analogy by Henry Porter in *The Guardian*.

With a shudder, I realise I am writing this on 4 August, 92 years to the day that my grandfathers, both serving officers and in the same regiment, learned they would probably be going to war. I do not know how long they thought they would be fighting for or if they expected to survive (both did), but I am fairly sure that neither had an exact idea of the complex forces that brought them to France and Mons by the end of month.

Few people in 1914 saw things as clearly as we do now...the building of alliances, the accumulating tension in Europe, and the setting of numerous invisible hair triggers across the Continent and the colonies. Without being alarmist, I wonder if, in future, students will look back on 2006 and observe similar developments and point to some of the same drift, blindness, and ambition that characterised the beginning of the last century.

Porter literally ignores the role of Iran in driving this conflict and instead blames the looming regional war on the alleged tendency of President Bush and Prime Minister Blair to view the conflict as a "struggle between the values of democracy and the tyranny of violent fundamentalism: a vision of a primordial conflict between the forces of light and darkness." Instead, Porter advocates that we drop the dangerous guidance of morality in favor of a "huge diplomatic effort with all concerned taking part."

In today's *Washington Post*, Richard Holbrooke, US ambassador to the UN under the Clinton administration, uses the same analogy for the same purpose:

Barbara Tuchman's classic, *"The Guns of August,"*...recounted how a seemingly isolated event 92 summers ago—an assassination in Sarajevo by a Serb terrorist—set off a chain reaction that led in just a few weeks to World War I. There are vast differences between that August and this one. But Tuchman ended her book with a sentence that resonates in this summer of crisis: "The nations were caught in a trap, a trap made during the first thirty days out of battles that failed to be decisive, a trap from which there was, and has been, no exit."

Preventing just such a trap must be the highest priority of American policy.... Every secretary of state from Henry Kissinger to Warren Christopher and

Madeleine Albright negotiated with Syria, including those Republican icons George Shultz and James Baker. Why won't this administration follow suit, in full consultation with Israel at every step?... The same is true of talks with Iran, although these would be more difficult....

Containing the violence must be Washington's first priority.

Note that the idea that we can settle all of this just by sitting down and talking with Iran and Syria—with no reference to the ideas, statements, goals, and actions of the Iranian regime—give the left's pronouncements on the coming war an air of unreality.

That is most striking in a recent article by New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof, an ersatz "liberal" who specializes in expressing grave concern about genocide and oppression, while counseling America against any military action to stop the killers and tyrants.

Responding to the question, "How can one negotiate with those who would destroy you?," Kristof blithely answers:

France is showing leadership in pressing for such a lasting deal, and Mr. Bush should push that diplomatic effort with every administration sinew.

Terms of a genuine settlement might involve an exchange of prisoners, Israel giving up the Shebaa Farms area (if not to Lebanon, then to an international force), and an Israeli promise not to breach Lebanese territory or airspace unless attacked. Hezbollah would commit to becoming a purely political force and to dismantling its militia, with its weaponry going to the Lebanese armed forces. Israel would resume talks with Syria on the Golan Heights, the US would resume contact with Syria, and Syria would agree to stop supplying weaponry to Hezbollah (or allowing it in from Iran). Syria and Hezbollah would then pledge cooperation with a robust international buffer force along the border. Some of this may have to come in stages: for example, with Hezbollah first leaving the border area and then giving up its weaponry....

So let's stop the killing and start the talking.

All of this is obviously a fantasy. Kristof offers not a single piece of evidence that Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah—who together conspired to initiate this war—would simply agree to stop arming and plotting against Israel.

Over on HBL, Harry Binswanger mentioned this passage and started a discussion trying to explain how Kristof could engage in such a massive, open evasion. He came to some good conclusions, but I don't think anyone has yet put together the big picture. This small evasion is just one tiny appendage of a much larger evasion.

The larger evasion is this: the left senses that a regional war is coming, that Iran is hell-bent on starting it, and that there is no way to avoid it. But all of this runs directly counter to their whole world-view. Rather than questioning that world view, they simply assert that this can't be happening. They have to believe that something, anything—no matter how implausible—will stop it from happening. If we just get everyone together and talk, and we keep tinkering with diplomatic solutions until we find something that works, surely we can find a way to avoid a regional war in the Middle East. Can't we? Please?

And so the left confirms the right's sense that the appeasement of the 1930s is the best historical precedent for the current era.

Fortunately, George Bush is not Neville Chamberlain. He has already waged two wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq. Imagine if, during the 1930s, the Allied Powers had already joined forces to defeat the fascists in Spain, then invaded Italy and overthrown Mussolini's regime. It would have made the coming conflict easier—but it would not have defanged our most dangerous enemy.

Unfortunately, George Bush is not Winston Churchill. It is as if, having suppressed fascism in Spain and Italy, we were still appeasing Germany and subordinating our interests to a wobbly consensus at the League of Nations. Just as Germany was the central enemy in the European theater of World War II, so Iran is the central enemy in the Middle East today.

Observing the events of today—the hesitation and uncertainty, the stubborn clinging to the fantasy that the enemy can be appeased if we just keep talking and find the right diplomatic solution—I now feel that, for the first time, I really understand the leaders of the 1930s. Their illusion that Hitler could be appeased has always seemed, in historical hindsight, to be such a willful evasion of the facts that I have never grasped how it was possible for those men to deceive themselves. But I can now see how they clung to their evasions because they could not imagine anything worse than a return to the mass slaughter of the First World War. They wanted to believe that something, anything could prevent a return to war. What they refused to imagine is that, in trying to avoid the horrors of the previous war, they were allowing Hitler to unleash the much greater horrors of a new war.

Today's leaders and commentators have less excuse. The "horror" they are afraid of repeating is the insurgency we're fighting in Iraq—a war whose cost in lives, dollars, and resolve is among the smallest America has ever had to pay. And it takes no great feat of imagination to project how much more horrible the coming conflict will be if we wait on events long enough for Iran to arm itself with nuclear technology. Among the horrific consequences is the specter of a new Holocaust, courtesy of an Iranian nuclear bomb.

The good news, such as it is, is that the air of foreboding about this new war is somewhat exaggerated. Yes, the conflict will become larger and bloodier—far

bloodier than it would have been had we acted earlier. But Iran is not Nazi Germany—a large, united, economically and technologically advanced nation that could nearly equal our military capability. Iran is a poor, backward nation with a large, restive dissident movement. Its military bluster is a hollow shell hiding its underlying weakness. It's time to break that shell and kill the monster inside—before it grows any bigger and more powerful.

We can all sense that the war is coming. It is vital for America to seize the initiative and fight it on our terms, when we have the maximum advantage.

It's five minutes to midnight. The time to strike Iran is now.