

January 22, 2006
Op-Ed Columnist

Hating the Bomb

By [DAVID BROOKS](#)
The New York Times

The Iraq debate split the country into two partisan camps, but the Iran debate is much more complicated. It's opening up a rift between conservatives and the Bush administration. It's dividing Democrats into rival factions: those who can contemplate the eventual use of force against Iran and those who can't.

It's an anguished debate because all the options are terrible. But this will be the major foreign policy controversy of the 2008 presidential election, and you can already see four different schools emerging:

THE PRE-EMPTIONISTS John McCain and most American conservatives believe the situation reeks of Nazi Germany in 1933. An anti-Semitic demagogue is breaking treaties and threatening to wipe Israel off the map. The madman means what he says and can't be restrained by normal economic or diplomatic incentives.

Therefore, Iran cannot be allowed to get the bomb. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad may not immediately lob the big one onto Tel Aviv, but a psychotic, hegemonic Iran would unleash its terrorist vassals and strangle democratic efforts in the Middle East, and could set off a cataclysmic war.

Pre-emptors would work with Europe and the U.N. to step up pressure on Iran, while making it clear the world is willing to do what it takes to halt the nuclear program. As McCain said on "Face the Nation": "There is only one thing worse than the United States exercising a military option. That is a nuclear-armed Iran."

THE SANCTIONISTS Democratic presidential contenders like Hillary Clinton and Evan Bayh have begun hitting the Bush administration from the right. But as Ivo Daalder of the Brookings Institution notes, this is not just campaign posturing. Centrist Democrats also believe Iranian nukes are unacceptable. Such nukes would set off a regional arms race. They would lead to Cuban missile crisis standoffs in the world's most unstable region. If Iran completes its program, that would completely delegitimize the international system.

The Sanctionists don't rule out a pre-emptive strike, but they don't emphasize it. Instead, they say the U.S. should be directly involved in negotiating with Iran, and the world should quickly impose serious economic sanctions, what Chuck Schumer calls an "economic stranglehold."

THE REFORMISTS Oddly, the Bush administration finds itself on the cautious, noninterventionist side. Bush officials have been walking away from broad economic sanctions and pre-emptive strikes (while not formally ruling them out). Blustery threats may sound good,

they say, but when you are governing, you have to consider the consequences; you have to hold the global coalition together; you have to make sure Iran isn't provoked into really dismantling Iraq.

In all my conversations with senior administration officials, I have never heard them be so cautious about what they can know and tentative about what they can achieve.

Their chief leverage, they say, is that Iran is not North Korea. The Iranians do not want to be global pariahs. There is an Iranian elite that likes travel and conducts international business, and it is beginning to react against Ahmadinejad's radical talk.

The administration believes blunt sanctions will drive the populace into the arms of the regime, but surgical sanctions will motivate internal reformers to change the regime's course. Privately, some administration officials believe there is no way to prevent Iran from getting the bomb; we might as well try to make the regime as palatable as possible.

THE SILENT FATALISTS Mainstream Democrats have been remarkably quiet on this issue. Their main conviction is that American-led military action would be disastrous. This shapes their definition of the problem. A nuclear Iran may not be so cataclysmic, they privately say. Why shouldn't Iran have as much right to the bomb as any other nation? The regime may be nasty, but it's containable with deterrence and engagement.

These liberals argue that if we weren't in Iraq, we'd have a lot more freedom to act against Iran, though you could also say the crisis would be worse if Saddam were still in power.

These four approaches have one thing in common: they all stink. For example, despite administration hopes, there is scant reason to believe that imagined Iranian cosmopolitans would shut down the nuclear program, or could if they wanted to, or could do it in time - before Israel forced the issue to a crisis point.

This is going to be a lengthy and tortured debate, dividing both parties. We'll probably be engaged in it up to the moment the Iranian bombs are built and fully functioning.