

On the Left, the Missing Debate over the Iran Deal

Did Obama foreclose better future options for the U.S. than a choice between acquiescence and war? The answer will soon come into focus.

President Trump's decision to remain in the nuclear agreement with Iran while working to fix its numerous flaws has temporarily put to bed an ideological debate, which I discussed in a recent NRO piece, between the two main conservative camps, known as "the Walkers" and "the Fixers." The fix-it approach adopted by the president was developed in think tanks such as the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) and the Institute for Science and International Security, and it involves a comprehensive strategy called "decertify, pressure, and fix." With the writing on the wall, the Walkers, who favored withdrawing from the agreement, have joined with the Fixers, albeit skeptically, and they reserve the right to say "I told you so" later.

Mark Dubowitz of FDD recently wrote that the president's choice "moved the debate on the fatally flawed nuclear deal from 'keep it or nix it' to 'fix it or nix it.'" The problem, however, is that movement is discernible only on the political right. Across the political aisle, no such debate or internal discussion is taking place. To grasp why, it is crucial to understand that for "the Vanguard," the leading camp on the left, the Iran deal was always about much more than the nuclear file. The reason that they and "the Believers" they spawned are so vocal in their opposition to tinkering with the agreement today is that Trump was elected, which gives him the authority to kill their deal and shine a light on its shortcomings. In the meantime, they are simply regurgitating the old lines without taking stock of their handiwork two years on.

The Underpinnings

From the outset, the Obama administration set out to lessen the American footprint abroad — especially in the Middle East. Part of that endeavor included trading traditional alliances for new ones that could bear the burden of the Middle East maladies in America's absence. To that end Barack Obama, shortly after taking office in 2009, began a process designed ultimately to reestablish full U.S. diplomatic relations with Iran.

For the Vanguard, reaching a nuclear accord with Iran was identified as the means to lock in America's strategic shift. In that sense, the deal was about transforming Iran so that it could "take its rightful place in the community of nations" and become a constructive regional player as America withdrew. Iran and its proxies were seen as a more cohesive and capable unit to inherit the Middle East than the mix of Sunni states, most of whom were working at cross-purposes. The years of Arab upheaval that began in 2011 only reinforced that notion.

Adopting this new approach, they believed, would help bring stability to the Middle East, allowing the U.S. to correct its unfortunate plague of foreign-intervention, which sprung from "a mindset out of step with the traditions of American foreign policy." Doing so would "restore America's standing in the world," which was a promise that candidate Obama made in September 2008. It was to be "the biggest thing President Obama will do in his second term on foreign policy," as Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security adviser for strategic communications, told progressive activists in January 2014. "This is health care for us, just to put it in context."

Marketing Snake Oil

Of course, flipping Iran from the dark side wouldn't be easy, nor would convincing skeptical Americans that the deal they were cooking up would be in their interest. It required a group of core believers who could carry the Obama administration's message, which was initially based on the fiction of an ongoing struggle between Iranian moderates and hardliners, epitomized by the 2013 election of Hassan Rouhani as Iran's president. He defeated the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was a wolf in wolf's clothing. According to the Vanguard's logic, anyone elected short of Caligula could be considered a moderate compared to Mr. "wipe Israel off the map" Ahmadinejad.

That election served as the pretext that Obama needed to sell America on the idea that the winds of change were blowing in Tehran, allowing him to keep his goal of a grand bargain hidden. In reality, the Obama administration sat on the sidelines a few years earlier in June 2009 and watched the regime brutally crush the Green Revolution with techniques that it later exported and perfected for Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian slaughterhouse.

Marketing this new formula under the guise of a nuclear deal necessitated an

avoidance of any back-and-forth discussion of the merits of the agreement itself, a willingness to attack all those who raised important questions about its shortcomings or sought to improve the deal, and the circumvention of Congress, which, if presented with it as a treaty, would surely have voted it down. Most of all, once the Vanguard caved on all of the promises it had made regarding what would be in deal, it had to rest its case on the bottom-line assertion that those who were opposed to it offered only war as a solution.

For this monumental task, Obama turned to Ben Rhodes, who developed, ran, and subsequently bragged to David Samuels of the New York Times about his creation of an echo chamber designed to sell their alternative facts about the Iran deal to the American people. Rhodes handpicked newly minted experts who then began popping up at think tanks. They didn't think like the American foreign-policy establishment — “the blob,” as Rhodes called them — they simply acted as parrots. To spread their centralized hot takes, the Vanguard relied on “hundreds of often-clueless reporters,” as Samuels described Rhodes's understanding of them. As Believers, they were only too willing to oblige. Together, they generated a feedback loop of misinformation, amplification, and reiteration.

And it all worked brilliantly.

Barack Obama and his Vanguard's echo chamber sold the JCPOA lemon in 2015 as an exclusive choice between the deal they cooked up or war. Those who opposed the agreement were smeared as warmongers who shared a common cause with the Iranian-regime hardliners. They scolded and undermined the Fixers then as they do now and then bypassed Congress to seal the deal at the United Nations. And they did so claiming that they had reached the best agreement possible, having exhausted the limits of U.S. leverage in search of a deal, and that to turn down what was now available would leave America with no other option besides war.

All of that is garbage.

Reality Strikes Back

The choice in 2015 wasn't between the Vanguard's deal or war but between its proposal and a better deal that it had promised to obtain but had failed to deliver. Sure, the agreement requires fixing or nixing, but 2015 was the right time to do it — before parting with America's ample leverage when they frontloaded all of the

financial rewards for their grand bargain in order to ensure that the deal could not be undone.

No, Barack Obama didn't lack the leverage — he lacked the will to demand a better deal in 2015, because it wasn't about the nuclear issue. If it was, he would have followed the urgent advice of those who were sitting on the fence, including some congressional Democrats, many in the think-tank community, and even former officials who had since left the Obama administration. They urged him to immediately work with Europe to define a set of penalties for Iranian infractions that would automatically snap into place to avoid precisely the kind of impasse that we now see emerging. If the deal was just about nuclear prevention, then Secretary of State John Kerry wouldn't have spent May and June of 2016 trying to “drum up business” for Iran in Europe, undermining the Treasury Department and Congress. Nor would he have continued his “awkward push” in London later that year, in October and November.

America's lack of leverage today — and the need to reestablish it to fix the deal — stems not from the ticking clock that started two years ago when Obama began to warn of Iran's shrinking breakout time. Its breakout time decreased dramatically during his watch, even as he opposed, in 2012, the very economic sanctions that had finally brought Iran to the table. America's lack of leverage today is a result of the decisions that Team Obama made at that time to shred the six U.N. Security Council resolutions painstakingly put in place over some twelve years. Indeed, history will record the bankruptcy of the echo chamber's claims.

Mark Dubowitz of FDD has it right; the debate today should be over whether to “fix it or nix it,” despite the Vanguard's continuing attempts to kneecap the efforts of those trying to strengthen the agreement. Contrary to its stale talking points, it is the Fixers who are doing all they can to prevent war by strengthening the ill-conceived deal. That leaves the Believers with an opportunity to cast off the spell of the echo chamber and join their effort. It is akin to the climactic moment of truth at the end of *Return of the Jedi*, when Darth Vader must choose between the Emperor and his son, Luke. But in this case, the Emperor has no clothes.

Make no mistake, if in the future the stark choice boils down to one between war and acquiescence because the U.S. lacks the necessary leverage, it will be a result of the bet the Obama administration placed and lost that fateful summer of 2015, when it surrendered to a terminally flawed deal of its own making. It will be

because the Obama administration succeeded in foreclosing better future options when it sold snake oil to the American people.

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Source: <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/453117/iran-nuclear-deal-obama-administration-jcpoa-ben-rhodes-%20war>

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