

May 22, 2006 In recent weeks the Bush administration has stated its willingness to use diplomacy in dealing with Iran, which is a welcome change from previous policy. Let's hope it's more than just a change in tone. With ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan costing more than \$5 billion per week, record levels of federal spending and debt, and oil hovering around \$70 per barrel, American taxpayers certainly cannot afford another war. Iran, like Iraq, is a major source of global oil. For all our posturing, the truth is that worldwide crude prices would spike rapidly if we attacked Iran. With summer coming, demand will increase and gas prices at the pump will be over \$3 for most of the nation. Airlines are raising ticket prices to compensate for jet fuel prices that have nearly doubled in a year. A strike on Iran in coming months would create serious trouble for an American economy that is already struggling with high energy prices. It's time for a foreign policy based on reality, a foreign policy that serves the interests of ordinary Americans. The reality is that we will continue to use oil as a major source of energy in this country for the foreseeable future, and therefore the health of our economy will be affected by the price of oil. Like it or not, some of that oil will continue to come from the Middle East even if we get serious about tapping domestic sources. The US has not used diplomacy with Iran for nearly 26 years, since the hostage crisis of the Carter era. But this "no negotiation" stance hasn't worked: Iran's defiant behavior continues, and its uranium enrichment program has not been dismantled. Is Iran a nuclear threat? Not according to our own CIA, which says Iran is years away from developing nuclear weapons. This is not to say we should sit back as nuclear weapons proliferate in the Middle East. But we shouldn't allow war hawks to wildly overstate the threat posed by Iran, as they did with Iraq. Since 2001 we have spent over \$300 billion occupying Afghanistan and Iraq. We're poorer but certainly not safer for it. We removed the Taliban from power in Afghanistan-- much to the delight of the Iranians, who consider the Taliban an arch enemy. Warlords now control the country, operating a larger drug trade than ever before. Similarly in Iraq, our ouster of Saddam Hussein will allow the majority Shia to claim leadership title if Iraq's election actually leads to an organized government. This delights the Iranians, who are close allies of the Iraqi Shia. Talk about unintended consequences! This war has produced chaos, civil war, death and destruction, and huge financial costs. It has eliminated two of Iran's worst enemies, and placed power in Iraq with Iran's best friends. Even this apparent failure of policy does nothing to restrain the current march toward a similar confrontation with Iran. What will it take for us to learn from our failures? Government power in Iran is divided, and President Ahmadinejad—the man responsible for hateful comments about Israel- does not control their nuclear policy. We should ignore him as a pariah, and deal instead with Ali Larijani, head of Iran's National Security Council, who has made several reasonable statements about the US and shows a desire to have direct diplomatic talks. Discussions with Iran are not appeasement. On the contrary, dialogue is needed to explain clearly that America's objectives of non-proliferation and peace in the Middle East will not be compromised. 25 years of isolating Iran has moved us farther from, not closer to, achieving those objectives.