

Blog Post: Sanctions

Our topic today is sanctions.

First, a well-kept (until now) secret: The annual event known as the AIPAC Policy Conference is a fraud. It is actually only semi-live. With several exceptions to maintain the illusion, the people on the stage are in fact brilliantly designed robots. From year to year, they say the same things, as do the invited keynoters, themselves also robots. With tiny variations, the script is the same from year to year; you know the language: “unshakable,” “absolute,” “shared values” and so forth. The audience, to the best of my knowledge and with the possible exception of the students who attend (1200 this year) is real, but even up as close as they are, they do not discern the visual and mechanical trick being played on them. It is, in truth, an awesome achievement, never imagined by Si Kenan, who founded AIPAC, nor by Morris Amitay, who led it for six years; rumor has it that Tom Dine, AIPAC’s exec for 13 years, had a glimmer of the idea after a weekend with his artist brother, Jim Dine. But, like so many things about AIPAC, it was actually a lay leader, Larry Weinberg of Los Angeles, who developed the idea and blunted it through to fruition. Curiously – life’s coincidences – it was less the result of Weinberg’s proximity to Hollywood – he was, in fact, deeply engaged with the fortunes of the Portland Trail Blazers, which he owned (and which is brilliantly chronicled by the late David Halberstam in his *The Breaks of the Game*) than the fact that another Larry Weinberg, who lived not far away, was a brilliant animator, winner of four Clios for special effects as well as an Oscar and sundry other awards, and once raised the possibility with Weinberg I in a different context. One thing led to another, and here we are, in 2008, in the immediate aftermath of the latest and (inevitably) most remarkable production ever. Think of it – three robotic presidential candidates (even though, since “Obama” and “Clinton” spoke the morning after the real Obama had achieved the delegate majority needed to be the party’s nominee, only Obama and McCain were by that time left), one robotic ruling (don’t laugh) Israeli prime minister and one R2D2 incumbent secretary of state. (That’s incumbent, not recumbent.) More attendees than ever.

I bother to recite this background in order to generate the appropriate degree of astonishment at the departure of one of the candidates from the conventional text. I have reference to John McCain, or the robot that played him (is a life-like robot a “that” or a “who”?), and that, at last, brings me to sanctions.

Here is the relevant McCain language, as delivered at the conference:

“We should privatize the sanctions against Iran by launching a worldwide divestment campaign. As more people, businesses, pension funds, and financial institutions across the world divest from companies doing business with Iran, the radical elite who run that country will become even more unpopular than they are already. Years ago, the moral

clarity and conviction of civilized nations came together in a divestment campaign against South Africa, helping to rid that nation of the evil of apartheid. In our day, we must use that same power and moral conviction against the regime in Iran, and help to safeguard the people of Israel and the peace of the world.

In all of this, we will not only be defending our own safety and welfare, but also the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people. They are a great and civilized people, with little sympathy for the terrorists their leaders finance, and no wish to threaten other nations with nuclear weapons. Iran's rulers would be very different if the people themselves had a choice in the matter, and American policy should always reflect their hopes for a freer and more just society.

To tell the truth, all the candidates, and Olmert and Rice and others, too, spoke warmly of sanctions. More, bigger, tougher. But only McCain developed, in the words I've just quoted, what might be called a theory of sanctions. His argument, in a nutshell, is that the advancing application of bigger and better sanctions will render the Iranian regime "even more unpopular than it is today" and will, presumably, lead the "great and civilized people" of Iran to rise up and demand regime change – as, he implies, happened in South Africa.

Except it didn't happen that way in South Africa. (It was the minds of several key leaders rather than a popular uprising that led to the end of apartheid.) And it didn't in Iraq. Or in Cuba. And it hasn't in Iran. Nor, we may note, have sanctions worked in Gaza. Or Sudan. Or Myanmar.

In fact, sanctions are more an exercise in venting than in foreign policy. The first recorded (and often cited) case on sanctions was a trade embargo imposed by ancient Athens in 432 B.C.E. against neighboring Megara – and that kicked off the Peloponnesian wars, the beginning of the end for Athens. In the 20th century, sanctions have become increasingly popular, and almost always ineffective, a sponge club with which to batter an enemy. Indeed, the effects of sanctions, when they are effective, are often unintended, as was the case in Iraq before the war, when the number of deaths among children suffering lack of food and medicines reportedly topped the deaths in Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. Neither India nor Pakistan was deterred in its nuclear ambitions by the threat of sanctions.

Here and there, some success: Libya, and then South Africa (more from top-down than from bottom-up, maybe Serbia, maybe Iraq's ability to rebuild its military after the 1991 Gulf War, maybe North Korea. And a handful of others, more narrowly drawn, more precisely targeted. The number of sanctions currently on the American books runs about 200, with at least 75 countries in the penalty box.

Sure, war should be a last resort. Sure, Iran should not be permitted to acquire nuclear weapons capability. Sure, diplomacy should be tried, and tried again. But sanctions are the preferred stick with which to make clear to the Iranians our seriousness, and it doesn't seem sufficient to say that sanctions can't be adequately effective so long as the EU doesn't join in their application (leaving Russia, China and others to roll tradingly along).

What, my friends (as John McCain is wont to say), to do?

Oh, a hasty addition: Dana Milbank, of the Washington Post, reports there that the Obama speech at AIPAC (interrupted 13 times by standing ovations) reflected a hard tack to the right for the candidate. Actually, that impression derives more from Obama's tone than from his substance, even though Obama did pledge an "undivided" Jerusalem, a pledge unlikely to come back to haunt him. At the same time, alone among the speakers, he spoke of the need for Israel "to refrain from building new settlements," Even Rice didn't have the temerity to include that call in her remarks.

Oh yes, there was no standing ovation for that part of Obama's talk.